M. Gorky

THE LIFE OF MATVEI KOZHEMYAKIN

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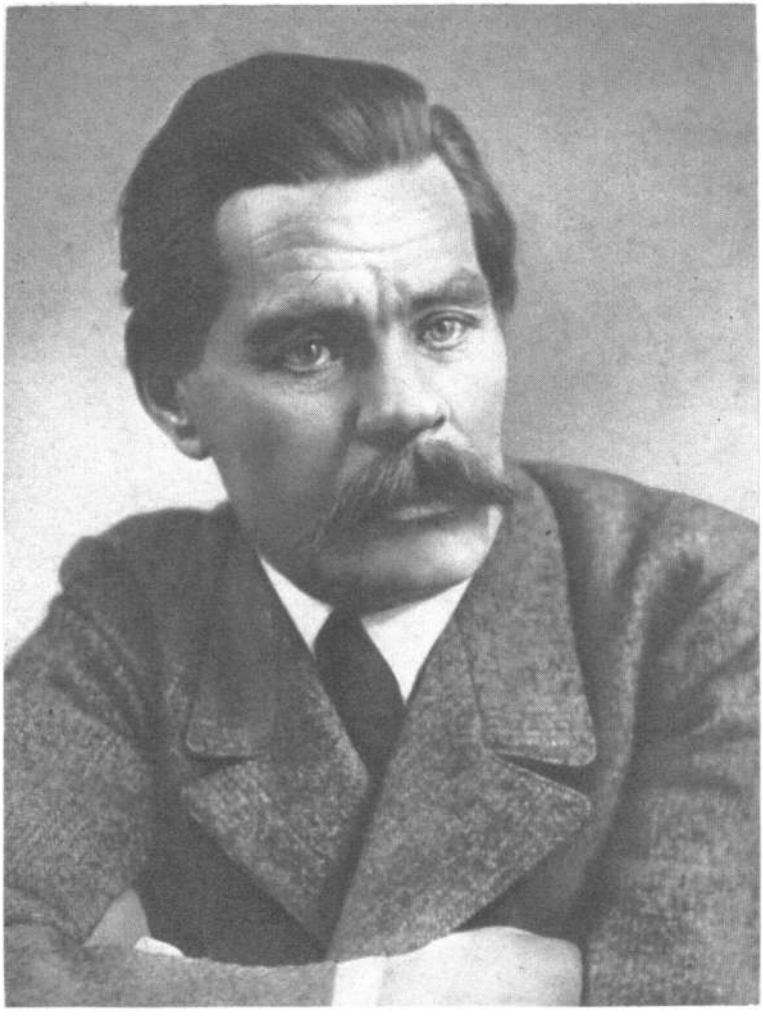

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THE LIFE OF MATVEI KOZHEMYAKIN

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TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN
BY MARGARET WETTLIN

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PART ONE

At night, a prey to the relentless insomnia of old age, Matvei Savelyevich Kozhemyakin, propped up with pillows, goes back in memory over his whole life day by day, and in a large clear semi-official hand writes down his recollections in a thick notebook under the heading:

"A record of thoughts and feelings, and also of certain incidents in the life of the town of Okurov, inscribed by an obscure resident of said town according to hearsay and personal observation."

Below this, in a finer hand, is added:

"To be read in good faith, for the sake of gaining some insight into the deplorable life of a Russian provincial town."

The notebook lies before him on a slanting portable writing-table whose legs, made of two semicircles of wood like the feet of a rocking-horse, rest on the blanket. To the right of the table hangs an ink-pot from a brass chain. When it swings it casts a little dark shadow that scuttles like a mouse over the blanket. On a tall stand at the head of the bed burns a lamp which pours a warm even light over the pillow at the old man's back, on his big ears and bald yellow pate encircled by a fringe of sparse white hair. Whenever the old man lifts his head a round shadow falls

on his notebook; he pats it with the puffy palm of a swollen hand, half-closes his eyes, listens to the uneven beating of his tired heart, and gazes at the white tiles of the stove at the foot of the bed and at the enormous bookcase filled with books in dark bindings which extends from end to end of the far wall.

The old man's gaze, intently concentrated upon the past, wanders slowly through the shadows of the big room, resting briefly on the vague outlines of familiar furniture. There are not many pieces, and all of them are so ponderous that they seem to have put down roots. The middle of the room is empty and its shadows are cold.

There is a door in the end wall, and between the door and the front wall extends another bookcase, also crammed with books. The two windows in the front wall are tightly shuttered. Between them hangs an antique oval mirror in an elaborate gilt frame, under the mirror stands a sofa, in front of the sofa is a table with curved legs and on the table lies an ancient leather-bound Bible with glittering silver clasps. Near the table are some bandy-legged armchairs in linen covers. On the floor, a thick felt mat; in the icon corner at the head of the bed, a three-tiered icon case containing nine icons. A crystal icon-lamp suspended on silver chains splutters ruminatively as it casts its light upon the gentle face of Jesus, the Virgin and John the Baptist in the top row; Nikolai the Miracle Worker, "Weep not, Oh Mother!", and Vasily the Blessed, in the middle row; and pictures of Kirill and Mefody, Antony and Feodosy, and the Moscow miracle-workers Pyotr, Alexei, and Ion, in the bottom row.

Over the bed in pine-cone frames are two photographs of a young woman with a curly-headed child in her lap. The pictures are so faded that they are like reflections in flowing water.

Matvei Kozhemyakin stares at them unwinking for a long time and then, crossing himself, whispers softly:

"Dear God in heaven, lengthen the days of my life that I may complete the task I have undertaken for my dear love's sake, and for the sake of my conscience."

Very deliberately he dips his pen in the ink-pot, bends his head submissively, and writes in a slow, clear hand:

"On concluding these reminiscences of my miserable, shameful life, I grievously confess that I have at diverse times been aware of some force, so gentle as to be scarcely perceptible, drawing me towards another life, a way unknown, but one I feel to be incomparably better than that which, because of moral and physical sloth that sought justification in the thought that I was no worse than others, I have led up to this, the hour of my death. I did not appreciate in time the forces of love and enlightenment and even resisted them, indolent slave that I was. When at last these noble forces took possession of me despite myself, it was too late. And thus, with the faint taste of this little honey on my lips, I die. . . ."

The silence in the room is as thick and grey as the mat on the floor. From outside come the muted sounds of the town's stealthy, furtive night life, impersonal sounds that do not disturb the congealed silence nor the old man's thoughts, so deep in the past.

It is as if he were standing alone in a waste land at the foot of a high mountain. It was from the heights of this mountain, veiled in dark clouds, that, gradually and involuntarily, he slid down to the level on which he now stands. And he is looking back up the long descent. Dozens and dozens of times has he retraced it in his mind.

He was not yet seven years old when his mother suddenly disappeared. She did not die, she simply went away in secret one night, leaving in the boy's mind a memory of her slender form, the frightened gleam of her dark eyes,

the flutter of her little hands, always seeking to hide themselves as if afraid. But he did not remember a word she ever spoke.

His father was a tall stout man with a red nose and a full red beard, like Maxim the Greek as depicted in icons. There was something mocking and unfriendly in the look of his grey eyes, and his lower lip protruded disdainfully. His movements were clumsy, he breathed noisily and he often railed hoarsely at the cook and his workmen. For a long time Matvei felt nothing but fear of his father, but one day he suddenly and unexpectedly came to love him.

It was on the second day of Easter week. The last snow had melted and warm fragrant vapours rose from the sun-warmed earth. Green patches of spring grass, delicate as lace, showed on the sunny side of the hills.

Matvei, in a pink silk blouse, followed his father about the yard admiring the glint of the sun on the top of his new patent-leather boots.

"Murugy, Murugy!" called his father, squatting down in front of the dog kennel. "Feeling lonely, doggy?"

Suddenly Murugy rushed fiercely out of the round opening. Matvei's father let out an oath and flung up his arm, spattering the boy's face with something warm and sticky.

People came running. Vlasyevna, the fat cook with heavy eyebrows, tied up his father's bleeding hand in a towel while he stamped, swore, and called for his shotgun. The dog rushed furiously up and down, clanking his chain, foaming at the mouth and howling in an unearthly way.

Sozont, the broad-faced pockmarked yard porter, brought the shotgun. Matvei's father dropped down on one knee and swung the barrel back and forth, back and forth, following the movements of the dog, aiming at its dripping red jaws and yellow fangs.

"You shouldn't . . ." Sozont kept muttering under his breath.

A shot rang out and his father, in a cloud of blue smoke, tottered and fell back. The shaggy spotted dog rose up on its hind legs, drawing the chain taut, yelping loudly, tearing convulsively at its bloody muzzle with its front paws. All at once it collapsed on its side, loudly gnashing its teeth.

"Got him in the eye," said Matvei's father to Sozont as he kicked the animal in the jaw.

"Savely Ivanovich," wailed Vlasyevna as she held out a dipper of water, "do wash your hand."

"I ought to shoot you too," roared his father with a wave of his uninjured hand. "How many times have I told you not to feed the cur raw meat! Sozont, go and call the doctor."

He began unwinding the blood-stained towel, while Matvei, breathless with fear and curiosity, took the dipper from Vlasyevna. Suddenly he dropped it, spilling water into the top of his boot: he had caught sight of red tongues of flame licking out of the entrance to the kennel as if trying to reach his father's legs. His father instantly seized the kennel, overturned it and began stamping on the burning straw. Little yellow flowers bloomed for a second beside the dog's muzzle and burst out along its back; his father ran through the smoke shouting, spluttering and tossing his head.

The acrid smell of smouldering straw and singed hide made the boy dizzy. On the verge of tears, he sat down on the steps of the porch and waited anxiously to hear what his father—who was now standing staring at him with his injured hand cupped in the other—would say to him.

The man came forward, sat down beside him, and said gently:

"Frightened, son?"

"Mm."

"That's all right. It frightened me, too."

Matvei glanced up at his father, unable to believe his

ears, amazed that such a big and intimidating man could speak so simply and unashamedly of being frightened.

"I'm sorry," said the boy after a pause.

"For the dog?"

"For you."

"For me?" drawled his father in an odd voice.

"The way that fire licked out at you! The way it tried to get you! Where did it come from?"

"From the wad. You know, we always push a wad of hemp in the gun."

Matvei nestled against his father and looked up into his white face and bloodshot eyes.

"Does your hand hurt much?"

His father thrust out his lower lip comically and glanced at his hand out of the corner of his eye.

"Not much," he said in a different tone. "Lucky it's the left one."

Never before had there been anything approaching intimacy between father and son, and the unexpected experience made the boy eager to ask his big red-headed father a hundred questions. The explanation of the fire, he felt, had been wrong. Too simple.

"Has a dog got a soul?" he asked.

"Why should it?" scoffed his father.

A pause.

"How it came out at you, the fire!" breathed Matvei.

His father laid a heavy, hairy hand on his head.

"It's sad about the dog," he said with unwonted tenderness. "We had him nine years. But it's a good thing it was me he bit. What if it had been you? God in heaven!"

His face flushed and his red brows drew together, darkening his eyes. But Matvei did not fear him this time, he even nestled closer, seeking the warmth of his big body.

Into the yard hobbled a jolly little man, round as a top, wearing an absurd checked cloak and trousers not tucked

into the tops of his high boots. Matvei's father went indoors with him.

"Don't come with us, Matvei," he said. "No sense in your seeing blood."

Left alone on the porch, the boy admitted to himself that his father depressed as well as intimidated him.

Soon after the disappearance of his mother, his father had taken in a kind old woman named Makaryevna; she had warm capable hands and a melodious voice, and she told him many delightful and breath-taking tales, among them a particularly interesting one about how God lives in heaven.

On a glittering throne sits the dread Lord of the universe,
While above Him the angels bright, the cherubim and the seraphim,
Hover on silvery wings, singing praises to Him, the Ineffable,
Pleading for sinners below, praying the Lord to be merciful,
Hiding their eyes from the awful glance of the Lord of Hosts. . . .

Whenever she intoned this poem little tears like the pearls in icon frames glistened in her kind black eyes.

When Makaryevna had been with them some three months Vlasyevna caught her stealing money. His father, Sozont and the cook laid her on a bench in the middle of the kitchen and tied her little hands under the bench with a towel. Vlasyevna, laughing, held her feet while Sozont, his face averted, silently and sullenly lashed her body, which shook like jelly.

"Mercy, have mercy!" spluttered Makaryevna as if she had a mouthful of water. "I didn't do it, I swear to God I didn't do it—oh! oh!"

"Give it to her, Sozont!" cried his father, who was standing beside the stove holding Matvei firmly by the hand.

"Look at him!" said Vlasyevna, winking in the direction of Sozont. "He's ashamed, hides his face, the ninny!"

Matvei longed to ask his father not to beat the old woman, but he dared not. He wept bitterly.

"Enough!" called out Kozhemyakin harshly.

That evening it was Vlasyevna who sat beside the boy's bed, and he had to listen to her unctuous admonitions instead of Makaryevna's quiet tales.

"You must be a good boy and love and obey your father, whereas you're always hiding from him. What makes you do that now?"

A little later the child was tended by a fat wench named Sekleteya, who had a flat face, a dark moustache and a wart on her left cheek. She was sluggish and did not know how to tell a story; she could only sing songs in the shrill voice of a magpie. Whenever Matvei's father happened to meet her he would wink knowingly, slap her on her broad backside, and call her a grenadier. More than once the boy saw him press her into a corner and pinch and maul her, making her squeak like sour dough.

Vlasyevna wept and threatened to leave.

"I'll leave, I will, the godless creature!"

But it was Sekleteya who left.

On the day she was paid off, Matvei, who was lying in bed, heard his father's voice coming through the thin partition separating their rooms:

"Why did you have to go about shouting and sulking, you fat fool?"

"My own dear darling . . ." crooned Vlasyevna.

"Keep away! You know it's all the same to me what woman I have. It's not me I'm thinking of. . . ."

"Aren't I a good nurse to Matvei?"

"It's a mother he wants."

The boy pulled the blanket over his head and cried softly.

He was willing to forgive his father for having had the old woman thrashed, and this talk with Vlasyevna explained to him in clear and simple terms all that he had felt was so shameful and loathsome.

He did it for my sake, he thought.

His father's face appeared at the window.

"Come and have tea, Matvei!" he called.

They drank tea, vodka and liqueurs of different colours, and they ate cake, *paskha* and hard-boiled eggs. That evening the jolly doctor played a *trepak* on the guitar. Vlasyevna danced so vigorously that the chairs jumped up and down, and his father, waving his uninjured hand in time to the music, whistled and shouted:

"Go to it, you witch! Come here, Matvei! So you love me, do you? Cheer up, you poor little shaver, with a nun for a mother!"

He gave his son a glass of syrupy liqueur; then, stamping his big feet and shaking his red head, he sang straight into the boy's face in a surprisingly thin and droll voice:

Here's a keg of frothing beer,
I brought it here to bring you cheer,
To give your eyes a merry shine
And set you dancing down the line.

For some reason Matvei felt sorry for his father; he felt that at any moment the man's voice would break off and he would burst into tears.

"Faster, Markov! Whoop-la! Faster, faster!" roared his father.

The little doctor formed a perfect ball as he pressed the guitar against his belly and bent his sweating bald head over it. His fingers plucked joyously at the strings and danced along the neck, while he sang in a mellow tenor voice:

The priest will die
And the soldier will die,
He alone will not die
Whom death passes by.

"Ee-ee!" squealed Vlasyevna, desperately wringing her hands above her head.

"Look at her, Markov!" shouted his father. "Positively a whirlwind, eh?"

"A wonder of wonders," replied the doctor as he splashed a gay chord from the strings. Matvei stared at him, trying to make out where his knees could be.

Presently Pushkaryov, a retired soldier who worked for Kozhemyakin, came in with a frown on his dark clean-shaven face.

"Why the devil did you shoot Murugy?" he asked gruffly.

Matvei's father held up his bandaged hand.

"See this? Took a joint off my little finger. Markov snipped it off with the scissors. Sit down."

"He should have snipped your head off," growled the soldier; then, chuckling, he took Matvei by the hand.

"Time to go to bed," he said.

On the following Sunday, when they had come home from mass, his father filled in the time before dinner by pacing the floor and singing to himself:

From earliest youth my soul has been
A battleground of passions,
But the Saviour knows my sufferings
And He will bring salvation.

Suddenly Pushkaryov thrust his grey head through the lacy leaves of a pot of geraniums standing on the window-sill.

"At your sacrilege again, Savely?"

"Be off with you!" said his father, barely interrupting his song.

"You don't even know the words. It's not 'knows,' it's 'sees': 'sees my sufferings.' "

His father strode to the window.

"What difference does it make, you old devil?" he shouted, pounding his breast with his fist. "The Saviour knows, the Saviour sees. . . ."

Pushkaryov burst out laughing.

"Sees, if you please! Ha-ha!"

"Be off!"

"Leave the Lamb of God alone!"

Savely Kozhemyakin let out a roar and, seizing the pot of geraniums in both hands, hurled it at Pushkaryov's head.

It all happened in a trice and Matvei found it very funny. Laughing, he ran to the window, but the next instant he jumped back in fright: his father's face was dark and swollen and he stared fixedly in front of him with blurred eyes as though he were blind. Clutching his chest with his right hand, he whispered hoarsely:

"God . . . dear God. . . ."

Matvei ran out of the room. In the yard he found the old soldier staggering away on his long legs, his head bent, one arm held out in front of him, the other wiping the blood and dirt off his face.

Matvei made a dash for the barn, where he burrowed into a silvery-grey pile of hemp. He could not help recalling the hair-raising tales told him by Makaryevna; something dreadful was always happening in the tales, but the good Baba-Yaga was sure to rescue the unfortunate little boy, whereas here, in real life, there was nobody to rescue him but Vlasyevna, who always gave off a suffocating smell of burnt oil.

From out in the yard came the voice of his father:

"I'll lock you devils up in the barn and set fire to it one of these days! You'll drive me to it! Matvei!"

Trembling with fear, the boy crawled out and stood, festooned with hemp, in the doorway. Without a word his father led him into the orchard, sat down on a mound of turf under an apple-tree, took him between his knees, and said in a cheerless voice:

"What frightened you? You'd ought not to be so easily frightened. How will you get on in life if you're always being frightened and running away? Haven't you ever seen him drunk before?"

"Yes, but you cracked his head," the boy reminded him softly.

"What of it? That's nothing compared to what he got in the army."

And he launched into a detailed account of how soldiers are flogged in the army. Matvei pressed his cheek against his father's chest and listened to a crackling sound that he thought must be the death-rattle of that black and fearful force he had so recently glimpsed in his father's eyes.

"Don't be afraid of him," said the man. "He just makes mischief for want of something better to do. He's really a good fellow. And don't be afraid when people fight. They'll make it up."

He spoke gently but hesitantly, choosing his words with obvious difficulty. From time to time he interrupted himself to sit and gaze silently up into the empty sky, yawning and smacking his thick lips.

The trees, spangled with the yellowish stars of young leaves, were greedily drinking in the sunlight; buds were splitting open with little popping sounds, bees were buzzing and the orchard was saturated with delicious smells. Life was bursting into bloom.

"Sleepy?" asked Matvei sadly.

"No, just bored. I'm always bored on Sundays."

"And on weekdays too."

"Sometimes on weekdays too."

Kozhemyakin gave his son a little squeeze with his knees and grew more animated.

"It was jollier in the old days. Not so quiet, perhaps, but more fun. One of these days I'll tell you stories about real life instead of those old wives' tales you're used to hearing. You're a big boy now; high time you knew what sort of life your father led."

"Tell me now," urged Matvei.

"Why not?" said his father after a pause. "For instance, I used to work with my father (that'll be your grandfather). We were hauliers, *burlaki*, walking the tow-path, twenty-seven in all, and your grandfather the bailer.* He was a big stern man with a mind of his own."

Savely Kozhemyakin screwed up his eyes, grunted, and cast a wandering glance over the pale green network of boughs.

"But this is heavy talk for a little shaver like you, Matvei; your head's too little to hold it yet," he said, looking at his son quizzically. "We'd better wait a bit to talk about these things."

"Oh, no, Father; tell me now," insisted the boy, pushing his father's beard away.

"Are you so ticklish?" laughed Savely. "This is ticklish, too—this going back over the old days."

After a moment's reflection, he began in a smooth, even voice:

"We were Kostroma men, lived on the Vetluga River, at a spot between two branches, the Oshma and the Nishma; deep in the woods, very snug, good for man and beast alike. The Oshma and Nishma were full of perch—there's no counting all the perch I caught as a boy. But the best perch, they're to be found in the Kotorosl River, near Rostov the Great. There's a fine town for you, lad! No chimes like the Rostov ones, and the town's a fortress that

* The bailer had a place in the boat and was the foreman of the *burlaki*.—*Tr.*

can't be taken: not the Tatars, nor the Poles, nor Bonaparte himself could take it. He was a brave tsar, that Bonaparte, and very clever. He took Moscow and the whole of Russia, but when he got to Rostov he just walked round the walls scratching his head and said to his generals: 'Nothing doing here, my hearties. We can't take this town.' But he just said that to fool them. Here's how it really was: at night, when he rode on his horse all by himself round and round the walls of the town, the monks kept ringing the bells, and the bells were made of pure silver that the townsmen had cheated the beggars out of: a beggar'd be given a silver coin and the Rostovites would exchange it for a copper one. The beggars were cheated, of course, but the bells were the better for it. Well, this chiming softened Bonaparte's heart. 'I've taken everything,' thinks he to himself, 'but what's the good of it? I'm a childless man.' That was because all his children died. And that's the real reason why he never touched Rostov.... Well, now about the perch: a perch, my lad, is a sly and greedy fish, and you've got to know how to catch it. Once my father and I went to the Oshma to catch perch. We went through the woods and it was dark. All of a sudden we see the landlord from the village of Bolotin coming towards us with a gun in his hand and a game-bag on his back. My father (that'll be your grandfather) whispers to me: 'Hide in the bushes!' I ducked in and lay there holding my breath...."

Kozhemyakin broke off with a grunt and silently cast his eyes about the orchard again, letting them come to rest on the domes of the convent church. The boy, who had been quietly combing his father's beard with his fingers, poked him impatiently in the chest with his elbow.

"Go on!" he said.

"Hm," said his father softly and musingly, "in a word ... well, after that your grandfather ran off to Rybny to be a *burlak* there."

"And the landlord?"

"The landlord? He—er—so to speak—" mumbled his father uncertainly, staring up at the sky. "In those days, son, the landlords did whatever they pleased. Their serfs couldn't call their souls their own and they were more afraid of those landlords than of the devil himself or the sprites in the bog. My sister (that'll be your aunt)—" The big red-haired man drew a deep breath and said plaintively: "There you are again! As soon as my story has anything to do with how people lived, there's no telling it to a little nipper like you. Can't be done, that's all. Run along, now; go and sit by the gate while I take forty winks. I'll think things over. . . ."

He relaxed the hold of his knees and gently pushed the child away.

Matvei found Sozont, the yard porter, sitting on the bench beside the gate. Barefooted, in a red calico blouse and blue trousers, he sat without stirring, as he always did, as if his broad back had grown to the fence. His hands were thrust inside his belt, his pockmarked face was a blank, his breathing was heavy, as if he were drunk, and there was a drunken look in the half-closed eyes that stared fixedly in front of him.

The only answer he ever made to the boy's questions was:

"Don't know. Who knows? Nobody knows."

But sometimes he would mutter hoarsely and incoherently, as if he really were drunk:

"There's only one thing I want—to take to the road. If you went straight ahead for a year, where would you come to? Nobody knows. Five years? Nobody knows. Nobody knows anything. They just sit about, taking up space. . . ."

He would stretch himself, then stare long and intently at his feet as if he could not make out what they were for. Presently the soggy little words would begin spilling out of his mouth again:

"A man once said to me in Pskov: 'I walked six thousand *versts*.' 'What of it?' says I. 'Nothing,' says he. 'So there's no end to the world?' says I. 'Who knows?' says he. Then he stole my shirt."

And again his thought would go wandering off. Once he gave Matvei a little poke in the ribs and said:

"What if you walked to the edge of the sea, the end sea, without any shores? The Caspian has shores, the Kirghiz know that. They've walked all round it. The Kirghiz are mostly magicians. . . ."

There was something unspeakably depressing about this man. Nobody in the house liked him. They said he was crazy and swore at him for his laziness. Matvei did not like him either. He always found it a strain, sometimes even frightening, to be with him, and occasionally his garbled words roused in the child a repugnance for people that made him hide away in a corner, from where he would gaze sullenly at the house and yard for hours on end.

Kozhemyakin's house had formerly been the office of the Bubnov estate on which it stood. Now, however, it was separated from the landlord's property by waste land with the ruins of a burnt wing of the big house on it. The site was overgrown with wild hemp, sorrel, burdock, honeysuckle and stinging nettles, amongst which the black trunks of trees thrust themselves up sadly; here and there new shoots springing from the roots stretched weakly towards the sun, but the weeds choked them and turned them into dry twigs that were like grey hairs among the green grass.

Low, squat and built of whole logs, the Kozhemyakin house stood sideways to the street. Its two side windows were screened from curious eyes by gratings and the trees of a front garden, and the yard was enclosed by a high fence with strong gates hinged to solid oak posts. The façade, with a carved porch in the centre, faced the yard. Its six front windows looked out on to the dark, blank,

boarded-up second storey of the landlord's house with its rust-eaten red roof, bent weather-vane, wind-battered chimneys and dormer windows that were like eyes contemptuously screwed up. Grey pigeons, finding access through the broken windows, had made their home in the attic, and hungry cats could be seen stealing over the roof, stalking the foolish, clumsy birds.

The high roof of the Kozhemyakin house was broken in an odd and unexpected way by two attic windows whose dull varicoloured panes were like the eyes of an owl staring unwinking into the daylight. On the other side of the house was a long narrow orchard and garden, with a bath-house standing among rows of carrots, beets and turnips on the other side of the raspberry patch. The orchard and garden were also hemmed in by a high fence with nails bristling along the top. On the other side of this fence was a convent garden. Among the heavy foliage of its ancient lime-trees could be glimpsed the sky-blue domes of two little churches belonging to the convent: a summer and a winter one. When the lime-trees blossomed the falling petals of their flowers gilded the grey roofs of the convent buildings. One lime was so tall that its boughs reached to the windows of the belfry; it could almost have fingered the little brass bells with its silky leaves.

The rectangular yard of the Kozhemyakin house was full of all sorts of outhouses which offered inviting nooks to hide in. The sturdy barn opposite the front gate had taken firm root in the ground. Faded by countless suns, washed by countless rains, it stood bursting with its store of silvery-grey cloud-like hemp. In fine dry weather its doors stood wide open, and it seemed to be an enormous stove filled with congealed smoke that exuded an odour of hempseed oil and pitch. Through these doors one reached the rope works, standing in a big open space extending out to the fields. Like them, it was overgrown with weeds except for a wide path down the middle, above

which quivering grey fibres of hemp were stretched; at the far end they were tied to a sledge weighted down with bricks. The contraction of these fibres pulled on the sledge, making it move forward with a creak. Under the hemp were wooden combs with grey strings vibrating noiselessly between their teeth, and from morning to night, day after day, four workmen shuttled slowly from one end of these strings to the other, walking backwards on the return as if they were tied to them for life. The men were sullen, barefooted, and dressed in blue sacking; the ground under their feet was strewn with cone-shaped wooden bobbins.

A vertical wheel with iron hooks in the middle revolved slowly in a strong oaken stand opposite the door of the barn. It was from these hooks that the thin streams of fibre poured as the wheel was turned by a half-blind, half-crazy old man named Valentin.

As the wheel creaked Valentin sang the same song over and over again in a voice so faint and nasal that Matvei could never catch the words. Two men worked the swingles, two combed the hemp, and grey-haired Pushkaryov moved among them so streaked with tar and tufted with hemp that he looked like a gypsy's dancing bear.

All the men moved languidly and without speaking. Pushkaryov often fidgeted about the wheel, feeling the taut fibres with dirty fingers, crouching down to peer along them through half-closed eyes, running on stiff legs to the end of the open space to lessen or increase the weight on the sledge. He would cough, mutter to himself, sit down on a stump, pick up the abacus and, holding it in the air, push the beads back and forth, swearing furiously whenever they got caught on bent wires or stuck to his tar-stained fingers. Putting down the abacus, he would pick up a long narrow notebook and scribble something in it with a stub of a pencil that he kept pushing between his livid lips. He never wore a hat, and his red face, covered

with grey stubble, was like a glowing coal sprinkled with ash.

When Matvei had nothing else to do he would climb up on to the turf roof of the underground storehouse in which tar, oil and various implements were kept. It was shaded by the thick branches of an old willow, and from this vantage point he could survey the entire weed-grown, hemp-strewn open space and the hills beyond, dotted with a few bluebells and buttercups, but sterile and dismal on the whole. Upon the hills browsed black and brown cows and grey sheep, and in the murky sky hung a watery sun, pouring its heat down upon the meagre soil. Beyond the bald tops of the hills could be glimpsed the jagged outlines of a forest. The heavy air was impregnated with the smell of hemp and pitch, which effaced the spicy fragrance of the orchards, where apples and cherries were ripening and black currants hung in heavy aromatic clusters.

On the right stood the abandoned house and the charred remains of the wing, on the left, the silent convent, and from every side a great dreariness invaded the lonely soul of the little boy, submerging all desire, swallowing it up as the rays of the sun are swallowed up in the tepid waters of a bog.

Pushkaryov would try to amuse the boy. On catching sight of him he would cry out hoarsely:

"Come here, lad!"

And when he came he would talk to him about the hard lot of a soldier.

"Want me to sing you a song?" he once asked him. "A fine song, sonny."

Without waiting for a reply he screwed up his face as if about to cry, rolled up his eyes, and began in a high womanish voice:

Our aw-fficers are aw-ful strict. . . .

All of a sudden his eyes flashed fiercely and he switched to a harsh tone:

Are aw-ful strict. . . .

Then again the high whine:

How many times have we been kicked. . . .

And again the harsh tone:

Have we been kicked!

At the end he closed his eyes and, shaking his head hopelessly, drawled in a squeaky voice:

They give the order: Forward march!

Despite the comic manner in which he sang, Matvei found the song depressing.

"Don't sing any more," he said.

"Don't you like it?" asked Pushkaryov in some surprise. "Humph! That's because I didn't begin with the beginning. It begins like this:

Bad news is spreading o'er the land,
Is being heard on every hand:
The Tsar is calling for recruits,
He'll put our boys in soldier suits.

"I don't want to hear it," said Matvei, and ran away.

Vlasyevna caught him and dragged him into the kitchen, where she perched him on the table in front of her and said, pursing her lips impressively:

"Let's have a nice quiet talk, you and me—better than hiding away in the corner like a spider. Do you know the number God's age is measured by?" she asked gravely.

"No," answered the boy just as gravely.

"Look at me, else you won't remember," said the fat cook. "The number is 33, mark that. And what is the number of generations from Adam until the birth of our Lord?"

"Don't know."

"Three hundred. And now listen to this," and she assumed a confidential tone: "that wicked Satan, the Antichrist, thinks to himself: 'Here, I'll make myself twice as

great as Christ'—and so he doubles himself—takes the number 666—but he forgets the cross is made of three parts, not six, fool that he is, and so from that day on the devil's been plain as the nose on your face to anyone that isn't a Pincher* but holds to the true faith."

She did not often speak of the Antichrist, but whenever she did, she spoke fearlessly and scornfully. There was something awe-inspiring in the way she pronounced the name of God, always in lowered tones, rolling her eyes upwards and crossing herself. At first Matvei feared God as an invisible, omniscient, omnipresent force, but gradually he came to accept him as a matter of course, as one accepts heat in summer and cold in winter.

The cook's favourite subject of conversation was witches, wizards and magicians. Matvei's interest in the stories she told about them was so great that it tempered the repugnance he felt for her.

When speaking about witchcraft she lowered her voice to an awed whisper, her round pink cheeks and fat neck turned white, she almost closed her eyes, and a note of hopeless fatality crept into her words. She told how witches cut a victim's footprint out of the ground and then muttered incantations over it to dry up his blood; how they scattered fevers and tumours in the air; how they drove coffin nails into a horse's shoes and at night the corpse from whose coffin the nails had been taken came and tortured the horse by sending shooting pains up its legs.

The boy noticed that, frightened by the awful things she had said about witches and wizards, she would hasten to add:

"But don't think all witches are wicked—oh, no! There are good ones, too—more good ones than bad. They know the uses of all the herbs, don't forget—the mad-grass, and

The Pinchers–a sect that pinched three fingers together when making the sign of the cross.–*Tr.*

the weeping-grass, and the fern. It's herbs that cure ailments and drive out evil spirits, and all in the power of witches and wizards. If, say, an enemy of yours sends you a curse on the wind, a witch can break the spell by rubbing your arm-pits with mad-grass. Oh yes, they do a lot of good, do the witches."

"Are they saints?" asked Matvei.

Vlasyevna considered a moment before she replied hesitantly:

"No, saints are those that take to a monastery or to the wilderness, but witches strike straight out against evil spirits."

"Does God help them?"

"Yes, indeed, God helps everybody."

"Why doesn't he strike the bad ones dead with lightning?"

Vlasyevna drew a deep sigh.

"I suppose he feels sorry for them," she replied. "After all, they're his creatures too."

But of all the things Matvei heard at that time, a talk he had with his father about the Volga impressed him most. It took place one spring evening in the orchard on his father's return from buying hemp in the near-by villages. His father was in a particularly kindly, pensive mood and the tone of his voice was that of one who was deeply aware of his sins.

They sat down at a table among the raspberry canes. Savely Kozhemyakin threw back his head, drew in a deep breath, and stretched out one arm.

"So there it is, the Volga, son–Mother Volga–wonderfully broad and deep and bright and flowing on and on, as if into the heart of you, or rather out of the heart of you, and the beauty of it is past all understanding as it stretches there, a wide, watery pathway all gold in the sun, and the boats skimming over it, tipping under their single sails like full-breasted single-winged white swans, golden

belyany moving slowly, like fine ladies in crinoline, and *mokshany*, and *kolomenki*, and all sorts of barges and barques, moving to and fro over the blue water, looking as if they were stitched in bright thread on velvet, some of the sails with red borders, and their masts tipped with gold weather-vanes—a cock, or an arrow, or a sword in a clenched fist—put there partly to show where the wind blows, but mostly for their beauty's sake, and the ridges of the roofs over the decks carved into birds and beasts and painted all the colours of the rainbow, and bright flags fluttering from the masts, and all of it reflected in the river like in a looking-glass, and all of it moving, quivering, alive. . . . Ah, Matvei!"

He intoned his words in a low singsong voice, moving the thick fingers of his lifted hand as if picking out a Psalm of David on the *gusli*.* Then, dropping his hand, he drew circles and crosses on the table as he went on with his ruminations:

"When you go sailing down the river on a barge the banks come up to meet you, the towns and villages stand at the edge of the water, the boats dart about like sparrows, the fishermen set their nets, and on Sundays and holidays the folk swarm in lively crowds on the banks, the women's sarafans like bright flames. The Volga peasants live well, son, and dress in fine clothes; their women, too, earn a kopek; money is plentiful and clothes are cheap. Sometimes your heart fairly leaps up when you catch a glimpse of the river-bank, and you laugh with all your heart and cry out, 'Hullo, good folk! It's a fine life you live, eh?' And the *burlaki* are pulling a barge on a rope, the men twisted into knots like *pretzels* on a string, looking very tiny in the distance, and their song comes to you as if big bees was swarming somewhere out of sight. At night the river is dark and silvery in the moonlight, and lights

* *Gusli*–an old Russian stringed instrument.–*Tr.*

gleam at the landing points, quivering in the black water and staring up at the sky as if from the very bottom of the river, and high in the sky hang our own Russian stars, and everything seems near and dear to you, and your heart is fair to bursting with the joy of it all. Mother Volga seems to put an arm round you and say tenderly, 'Don't worry, son, everything will turn out all right.' God gave us the Volga to ease our labours, Matvei, and when you look at her your heart swells with joy and there's nothing you need, nothing you want, but to follow her on and on. That's the sort of river the Volga is, son!"

He sighed and fell silent, his head bowed. The boy, too, was silent, and filled with a joyous sense of pride: never before had his father spoken to him so intimately and with such feeling.

"Now tell me about yourself," he said in a little while.

"About myself?" repeated his father. "What's there to say? I don't know how to talk about myself. I was fifteen years old when my father went off down the Volga. I was a mischievous lad, I was. You're a quiet one, but I was a real devil. I took many a thrashing for it, from my father and others—from anyone who felt like exercising themselves. I couldn't stand those thrashings—whenever I got one I ran away. One day in Balakhna my father gave me a terrible drubbing and I jumped on a raft bound for Kuzdemyansk. I've been fending for myself ever since; lost sight of my father and never set eyes on him again."

He knitted his red brows, let out a grunt and crossed himself, brushing the boy's cheek as he did so, and then hugged him close.

"You're not old enough to hear such things," he said. "I've no business telling them to you. If you were a little older, now—"

"I'm almost eleven," Matvei reminded him.

"Well, well! Now run along and let me have a little nap. Tell Vlasyevna to bring me the felt mat."

"I'll bring it myself."

"No, let her."

Matvei was saddened; he did not want to go away. But when, on leaving the orchard, he gave the heavy gate a push and it swung wide open in front of him, a strength he had never known before welled up inside him and he crossed the yard with a heavy rolling gait like his father's. But as soon as he reached the kitchen the sadness came back. There sat Vlasyevna at the table studying her nose in a little looking-glass. She was wearing a lavender sarafan and an embroidered blouse with blue ribbons on it. She looked very pretty and self-assured.

She's better than me, he thought wistfully, as he said in a rough tone, "Hey, you; take Father the grey mat."

She glanced up swiftly, blushed and ran into his father's room. He was glad to see that he had disconcerted her. Frowning, he tossed back his head and strutted out of the gate.

He had been forbidden to go into the street without Sozont, and never had he violated his father's order; but today he had a great longing to sit outside the gate by himself.

There was not a cloud in the sky nor a soul in the street. The townsfolk, having stuffed themselves with cabbage pie, were enjoying a midday nap. Somewhere far off swings were creaking and girls were squealing, and from the river came boyish shouts, softened and blended by the distance.

On either side of the sunlit street he caught the sparkle of glass in the open casements and the gleam of painted decorations on the shutters. Here and there birds in cages had been brought out and hung on the trees of front gardens; goldfinches sang lustily, gay siskins twittered, and a dawn-bird, Matvei's favourite, whistled plaintively on the window of the Basunovs' house. He loved it for its modest plumage, its red breast and dainty legs, as much as

for its sad and simple song. The bird always made him think of his mother.

The mocking cries of the starlings drowned the spring song of these captive birds. Black and shiny as drops of oil, the starlings sat fluttering their wings and opening wide their yellow beaks as they imitated all the other birds, comically mixing up the song of the lark with the cackling of hens. Matvei remembered Vlasyevna telling him once when he asked her why the starlings imitated other birds:

"Because they're spiteful and jealous. Starlings and sparrows don't believe in God; that's why they were never given a song of their own. It's the same with people: if you don't believe in God you have nothing to say."

The child gazed down the length of the grassy street and imagined it was the wide blue breast of the Volga. The street was the river, the houses and gardens its banks.

But her stories were not as thrilling as his father's had been.

Suddenly he heard the sharp click of the latch and caught sight of his father in the gateway. The man's lower lip was thrust out and he was gazing down the street through half-closed eyes.

"Come here," he said.

When they were inside the yard he took his son by the shoulder.

"A fine thing!" he said grimly. "No sooner did I tell you I wasn't one to obey, than you thought you'd try it yourself, and out of the gate you go. Haven't I told you not to go out alone? And besides that, you were rude to Vlasyevna in the kitchen."

"No, I wasn't," sulked Matvei, his eyes on the ground.

"She said you were."

"I wasn't."

For a while his father walked up and down, glancing into all corners of the yard as if looking for a hiding-place.

When at last he took his son into his room he closed the door, sat down on the bed, planted the child in front of him and held him between his fat knees.

"I want to talk to you again. This time about serious matters."

He laid one heavy hand on Matvei's head and drew the other, with a joint missing from the little finger, across his flushed, uneasy face.

"I may be only three-and-fifty, but I've lived a hard life; all my bones ache and at night I have a pain in my heart, as if it wasn't in the right place and was always getting caught on something. Take that pendulum, for instance—like as if there was a knob on the wall that kept catching it and stopping it. That's how it is with my heart."

Matvei felt sorry for his father. He snuggled up to him and said:

"It'll pass."

The man raised his eyes to the ceiling, his beard trembled, his lower lip hung open and he gave a sigh.

"Everything'll pass when you die," he murmured, "but until then it hurts."

His hand seemed to grow even heavier.

"And what's more," he said, looking out the window, "I'm thinking of getting married."

"To Vlasyevna?" asked his son, hiding his head under his father's beard.

"No-o. To another."

Matvei smiled with relief.

"I'm glad it's not her."

"Glad, you say?"

"Yes," whispered the child quickly. "She's always talking about witches and wizards."

"I don't believe in them, son," said his father cheerfully. "I've punched the faces of those wizards on Sundays and weekdays; I once worked for a miller who was a wizard, and one day I took him by the throat–"

He broke off, closed his eyes, shook his head mournfully, and sighed again.

"And so you'll be having a stepmother, son."

"Is she young?" asked Matvei.

"That's just it."

Matvei knew why people got married; the candid way in which Pushkaryov, Vlasyevna and the workmen talked about sex had made things clear to him long ago. He was glad to hear that his father had given up Vlasyevna and he was eager to know who his stepmother was to be. But at the same time he felt a sadness creep over him and lost all desire to talk.

"Oh, Lord, Lord!" breathed his father. "Women—that's something you can't understand yet. It's all a matter of fate, something there's no getting round. Even your monks—"

"You had a wife once," said Matvei, struggling to keep back the tears.

"Yes, I did once, but no more. You need somebody to look after you, somebody good and kind. I've found such a one."

He turned his gaze to the window-sill where two pots of roses and a bottle filled with golden liquor stood. "Your mother was a clever woman, son," he went on in a low voice. "Very clever and quiet. She understood everything and felt so sorry for people that a convent was the only place for her. So into a convent she went."

Matvei gave a little start and looked up in surprise.

"Is she in a convent?" he asked. "Ours? The one next door?"

"No," said his father, shaking his head sadly. "She's far, far away. Somewhere deep in the forest, nobody knows where. I don't know. I did everything—coaxed and threatened her. 'Varvara,' I said, 'think what you're doing, Varvara,' I said, 'I'll put you in chains, you vixen!' She just got down on her knees and looked at me. There was no

bearing that look of hers. It went straight to your heart. I'd give her a push and tell her to go away. Down on her knees she'd go, and just look at me. She never begged me to let her go. Just looked at me."

Tears rolled down Matvei's cheeks. It was both sad and joyful to hear his father talk like this about his mother. Bending down, the man covered the child's face with his red beard and kissed his forehead.

"You've got her eyes," he whispered, "and you, too, seem to understand everything. Ah, poor chap, with a nun for a mother. . . ."

His beard grew damp. Matvei felt a sharp stab of love and compassion for this big red-haired man who was suffering as he himself had suffered so often.

Now that Matvei knew his mother had taken the veil he found Vlasyevna even more hateful. He avoided being with her and never looked into her fat face when speaking to her. And so it was with a certain satisfaction he noticed that she seemed to be shrivelling. She never dressed herself up in gaudy sarafans any more and went about with drooping head and tight lips.

Shortly after this his father fell ill. For two weeks he lay on the grey mat on the floor of his room, his face covered with dark blotches, and day after day the child sat beside him listening to his hoarse voice, which was frequently interrupted by a deep, loose cough.

The windows were tightly shuttered, the room was dark and cool, and the child's impressionable mind easily absorbed what his father told him.

"I was just a plain ordinary fellow, open-hearted and trusting, but the rascals got me. There's a sort of Russian that looks all right on the outside and talks like an honest man, but inside he's rotten and a rascal. He doesn't trust anybody and there's no trusting him, the scoundrel. But he crawls into your soul like a worm and gnaws it away before you know it. It was easy to make friends with me—

any cheerful fellow I ran into was my friend. The rascals took advantage of this. When you grow up, Matvei, you may hear people say bad things about me, such as that I didn't come by my money honestly or something of that kind, but don't you believe them, son."

"I won't," promised the boy.

"Don't believe them. Money? Everybody comes by it in the same way—by grabbing his chance. If you're lucky you'll get rich; if you're unlucky you'll remain a beggar no matter how many people you rob. It's all a gamble. Gambling often leads to a fight, but what of it? It can't be helped: that's our fate, to live by a gamble. I'm not boasting, perhaps what I did was wrong and against God's commandments, but everybody does the same. Those that are ashamed to go against them become monks and nuns. But we can't all go off to live in monasteries—the monks would die of starvation if we did. And a man can't live by himself—even the fish swim in shoals and gobble each other up.

"Compared with others I don't think I was such a great sinner. Take the district I come from, Vorgorod. All the rich men there were once robbers. Sokovnin, for instance, the steamship man and an elder of the cathedral—don't I know him! He was a bosom friend of Maxim Bashlyk, and back in the twenties or even earlier Maxim was head of a band that worked on the upper Volga, robbing the people of Balakhna. Once they stole everything from a famous merchant named Zuyev, carried off seven barrels of gold and silver. There weren't many men in his band, but each was handpicked. Not one of them ever got caught—think of that! Today Sokovnin's a pious man and in great favour with the authorities. And there are plenty like him. Take the Maslovs—big fish merchants. They got their start with counterfeit money, and now old Maslov walks about with a gold medal on his chest. Don't think I'm blaming anybody, I'm only telling you. In the old days the whole

upper Volga lived by highway robbery. That's what Vorgorod's famous for, that's why it's so prosperous. Every family has its skeleton in the cupboard, and today each of them's got some kinsman who's a monk or a nun or even a hermit, to do penance for the sins of the past. First there was highway robbery and counterfeit money, then there was the Crimean War. During the war the citizens of Vorgorod passed off bast as leather for making army boots. Money came pouring into the laps of the merchants in those days. Silver coin was scooped up by the measure. During the famine in the forties Labzin, the big grain merchant, went to Governor Buturlin and said, 'I'm giving three measuresful of silver to the starving.' 'How much?' they asked. 'Three measuresful,' says he, 'and I can't even count how much a measure holds.' No, they weren't mean with their money, threw it about like gentlefolk, but there's one big difference between them and their betters: the gentry know how to live. Yes they do, son, they know how to live."

Smiling as if pleased by some memory, the old man closed his eyes and said nothing for a while.

"Remember one thing," he went on at last, "there's no rose without a thorn, but once there's a thorn, there must be a rose. Our Russian God's a good God, he'll stand anything. He can see there's more foolishness than badness in us. Ah, my boy, you want to stop and think a long time before blaming a person for what he does. But we're quick to blame. We sin like humans and punish like animals—fly at each other's throats and choke the life out of each other."

As he listened, the child wondered why his father led such a secluded life. No one except Doctor Markov and Deacon Korenev ever came to see him, and he himself rarely went out for walks as the other townsfolk did, dressed up in their best clothes and with their wives and children. He attended the St. Nikola Church, the poorest

in town, and Matvei had never even been inside the fine monastery where all the rich people attended service. Whenever the Kozhemyakins entered their dark and crowded church the boy noticed that the people made way for his father reluctantly and followed him with hostile looks, whispering in an unfriendly fashion behind his back.

He remembered that one day Pushkaryov had said to Sozont jocularly:

"Who knows where you and your master come from, or where he got his money, or who you really are? Take me, now; here's where I was born and bred; I can name my grandfathers and my great-grandfathers—dozens of them—and tell you what they did and what they got thrashed for. But you? Who are you?"

"So you see life's not an easy thing, son," went on his father, scratching his chest. "And so we ought to live more simply and friendly-like, but instead each tries to unearth the other's sins to hide or excuse his own. Searches for them like lice in his neighbour's coat. That's not right. Nobody ever feels sorry for anybody else. We're like a pack of wolves."

"What about Mother?" Matvei reminded him softly.

"Mother?" said his father pensively. "Yes, she felt sorry for people. She was a weak, timid little thing; her mother and father were whipped in the market-place and she saw it. Her father was an icon painter. They lived in Yelatma, a place on the Oka, and once he was accused of stealing the silver off an icon and his wife of hiding it away. He swore he hadn't, said it was the local landlord who had stolen it. Now the landlord was a rich man and an elder of the church, and he and her father didn't hit it off for some reason or other. Well, her mother and father were arrested, but they ran away and the landlord's huntsmen were sent out to find them. They caught them near Murom, there was a tussle, and Varvara's father wounded one of the men.

I was in Yelatma at the time and stood in the crowd watching her father and mother being whipped, and I saw Varvara lying on the ground writhing as if she had the black death. Enough to break your heart. Then her mother and father were sent to Siberia and she was left alone like a lamb in a wood. We got married and moved here; I bought this house and set up in the rope business. I had a good knowledge of it and at first I liked it: it was like playing on the *gusli,* walking up and down the length of the strings, thinking back over life. And so we went on living together, not a jolly life, but friendly enough. True, once we had an argument about some ear-rings. I had a pair of ear-rings—rubies and pearls and pearl pendants the size of your finger-nail, very handsome ear-rings they were—I came by them quite by chance. 'Here, Varvara, put them on,' says I. But she wouldn't. 'It's my soul I want to make beautiful, not my body,' says she. 'You little fool,' says I, 'you can't hang jewels on your soul.' And we argued on and on. . . ."

He threw his son a sidelong glance, cleared his throat, and sat in silence, with closed eyes.

Shortly after Savely Kozhemyakin recovered from his illness he got married. At the wedding his bride, a tall young woman, wore a blue sarafan embroidered in silver and over it, despite the heat, a crimson damask jacket. Her round good-natured face had a misty look, as if it were dissolving in tears, and everything about her reminded one of ice floating on the river on a sunny spring day.

His father stood beside her in a blue coat and yellow silk blouse. The light of the icon-lamp falling on the yellow silk gave Matvei the impression that his father's chest was on fire, and that it was the heat from this fire that made his hair and face so red.

The child was dressed in a red blouse, wide blue trousers, and green soft-soled leather boots embroidered with

red and green silk in Tatar style. The official witnesses to the wedding were the doctor, the deacon, Pushkaryov and an enormous black-bearded muzhik from Balymer named Yakov, who was the bride's uncle. The ceremony took place on a weekday. There were not many people in the church, but a constant drone of old women's voices came from the shadowy recesses. Near Matvei stood a tall bony old woman dressed in black like a nun, who kept whispering to Vlasyevna:

"There's nasty rumours abroad about your master . . . .", or "Say what you like, but she's no match for him . . . .", or "Match or no match, it's all over now. And where does that leave you?"

Why doesn't father get rid of Vlasyevna? thought Matvei.

After the ceremony the bride asked permission to walk home in her wreath accompanied by the priest, but her husband objected.

"Better not," he said brusquely.

A murmur of disapproval ran through the church.

They went home. Matvei, hatless, walked ahead pressing the icon to his chest with both hands, and when he stumbled on crossing the street, he heard Vlasyevna whisper gloatingly:

"See, he stumbled!"

The wedding procession was trailed all the way by a spotted dog; from time to time it ran ahead of the people, and then a tall old woman would dart out, shake a stick at it, and hiss:

"Go away, you blasted cur!"

"A spotted dog means a spotted life ahead," said Yakov, the black-bearded muzhik, in a voice that could be heard from one end of the street to the other.

When they reached the yard of their house the women began to argue about something and the bride stood looking at them, her blue eyes wide with fear.

"Oh, dear, I don't know how . . ." she began plaintively.

"Where's the drinks?" asked the old woman in black.

"So she don't know how, don't she?" said someone in feigned surprise. "Don't know how, d'you hear that?"

A woman as round as a two-pood weight held the bride by the sleeve and kept saying to her:

"Start wailing; start wailing."

And suddenly the bride did start wailing:

Ah, miserable maid am I,
No father or mother have I,
Not even a brother have I,
To find a husband for me,
To give me a dowry,
Of a little calf or a little lamb . . . .

"You silly goose!" cried the old woman in black contemptuously. "When's the time to wail? Before going to the church, stupid!"

Matvei's father jostled the women apart and took his bride by the hand, saying with a short laugh:

"Wait till I beat you; that'll be time enough to wail."

When the priest, the archdeacon, and Deacon Korenev arrived, all the guests rushed from the yard into the house, pushing one another to find places for themselves at the table, and once they were seated they were too busy gobbling up chicken and noodles and guzzling vodka and liqueurs to utter a word for some time.

Matvei sat next to his stepmother and kept looking up into her brimming eyes, which reminded him of violets and bluebells sprinkled with dew. She seemed to be afraid of him and constantly edged away, lowering her wet lashes. Seeing her timidity, he whispered into her ear:

"You don't have to be afraid of Papa."

She heaved a sigh.

As long as the priest and archdeacon sat at table nobody

spoke except Pushkaryov, who told endless stories about a certain army priest.

" 'I may not have a gun,' says he, 'but I can pull your ears for you!'—and he gives the corporal's ear a good tweak."

The priest roared with laughter, tossing back his head like a reined-in horse. His long hair fell about his pimply face; he pushed it behind his ears and blew out his cheeks; then, abruptly cutting off his laughter, frowned on the assembled guests as he quoted a passage of scripture in a loud voice. Presently, accompanied by the archdeacon, he staggered out, waving his hand in all directions, and as soon as he was gone the tall old woman got up, tightened the knot of her kerchief, and said loudly and reproachfully:

"It's very wrong of you, Savely Ivanovich, not to observe the customs; and of you, too, Pelageya—very wrong indeed. You're the mistress of the house now, and you haven't so much as poured your guests out a glass to toast your health in."

"Pour it out yourself, you harpy!" cried Matvei's father, smacking his lips.

"Don't pay any attention to him, Ma," said Yakov disparagingly as he put a spoonful of sugar into his vodka.

The woman who was like a two-pood weight began to giggle.

"How can there be talk of observing the customs," she said. "What's the sense, say, of putting a flower in the roast chicken—everybody knows the bride's no virgin. The flower was plucked long ago."

The bride bent her head and began to cross herself hastily and Matvei heard her whisper to herself:

"Holy Virgin . . . have mercy. . . ."

His father jumped up.

"Mind what you're saying!" he shouted at the women.

The old woman dropped into her chair as if cut down, while the host, making a sweeping gesture over the board, went on in a calmer tone:

"I didn't invite you here to teach me what to do, but to partake of the food and drink the Lord has blessed us with."

"I don't want any food," declared Yakov, belching loudly and falling forward on the table.

"Then drink."

"I don't want any drink. Your drink's no good."

"Because you put sugar in it."

"Begrudge me a little sugar, do you?" He brought his palm down on the table with a loud bang. "Begrudge me a little sugar?"

"Oh, keep quiet," said the host with a disgusted wave of his hand.

There was a jumble of voices: Pushkaryov began arguing with the deacon, Markov with the women, and Yakov, suddenly becoming violent, twisted a tin plate and scattered the spoons with a sweep of his arm.

"And I don't want to sit here. I'm your guest, aren't I? I suppose you think you're better than the rest of us because you live in town?"

"Ugh, what a pig!" said Matvei's father with disgust.

"Who's a pig?" asked Yakov, blinking his bleary eyes.

"You are."

Yakov sat staring at him for a while, then, leaning on the table with both hands, pulled himself to his feet.

"Ma! Marya! We'd better get out of here," he shouted in a maudlin voice.

The bride jumped up with tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Uncle Yakov! Aunty! Granny Avdotya!" she wailed.

"Silence!" cried Kozhemyakin sternly, pressing her back into her chair. "I'm not feeding pigs. Hey, fellows, throw them out, since our food's not to their liking!"

Pushkaryov, Sozont and the workmen began pushing the guests towards the door. The weeping bride wiped her tears on the sleeve of her muslin waist.

Like a cat washing herself, thought Matvei.

When they were gone his father got up, squared his shoulders and threw back his head.

"So that's that, good friends," he said. "Let's have a little fun while there's still life in us! Bring out your *gusli,* Vasily Nikitich, and give us a tune. And you, Pelageya, pull yourself together; enough of your weeping! Why are you so frightened of her, Matvei? Look, she's not much older than you are."

"You ought to live in fear and trembling, Savely," said the deacon, taking his *gusli* out of the case.

"And instead he's possessed of a dozen devils," cried Pushkaryov.

Matvei edged up to his stepmother, who put an arm about his shoulders as they watched the deacon tune up.

The deacon, slender as a wand, looked like a woman in his long cassock; there was something incongruous about his thin shoulders and graceful neck topped by a large face with broad brows, high cheek-bones and a scraggly beard. He kept twisting a tuft of hair growing out of a wart under his left eye, pulling down the eyelid, which made his right eye look smaller than the left. His eyes glowed in their deep sockets with a warm light betokening sad and deeply felt things.

At last he laid his *gusli* on the edge of the table, turned back the sleeves of his cassock and undershirt, revealing a pair of thin and sinuous arms, and ran his slender fingers up and down the strings.

"Hark, Savely," he said. "This is an ancient wedding-song."

And he sang in a pleasant voice, sprinkling sweet notes from the strings upon his words as dew is sprinkled upon flowers:

Hark to fair Venus' complaint:
"My apple ripe is stole away;"
And hear reply: "Stay thy complaint,
Two hearts united are this day."

Seeing that his stepmother's tears still flowed, Matvei gave her a little nudge.

"Don't cry," he said.

The deacon went on singing solemnly, pouring the warm glow of his handsome eyes upon the boy's face:

Now is our riddle made full clear:
A lovely bride is being led
Down to the altar to her dear,
And then to the waiting bridal bed.

"Don't cry, I tell you," repeated Matvei, himself moved to tears by the lovely music and the sentiments it evoked.

The woman leaned down and whispered words he knew only too well:

"I feel so bored!"

"Very nice, but no go to it," cried Matvei's father, striding into the middle of the room. "Here, you two fellows, let's have something to put life into old bones—come on!"

"Joy, too, can be holy and minister unto the heart," said the deacon.

Markov snatched up his guitar, drew his knees up to his belly, sat hunched over, and sang in a high voice:

Past fair fields where winter wheat is blowing . . . .

The deacon struck all the strings at once, festooned the melody with delicate trills, and added his rich voice to the song:

Past green meadow-lands the river bright is flowing. . . .

Matvei's father shrugged his shoulders and winked at his bride.

"Come along, Pelageya," he cried, and with a toss of his head sailed down the length of the room, one hand on his hip, the other behind his back.

"I suppose I must," said Pelageya meekly, getting up and straightening her sarafan.

The song grew in volume:

Down the river bright a Golden-Eye is swimming,
O'er the water bright a Golden-Eye is skimming,
Higher, higher than the banks he shakes his wings.

Kozhemyakin's feet scarcely touched the floor as he sailed up to Pelageya; when he had almost reached her he suddenly withdrew, beating out the rhythm loudly with the heels of his boots, and this was a sign for Pelageya to follow him, which she did with a sideways glide, her hands on her curved hips, her eyebrows raised as if in surprise, her eyes still glistening with tears.

"Begone, old age! Out of these bones!" roared Savely Kozhemyakin.

Up the river bright his loved one comes to meet him,
Happy Golden-Eye! Ah, how sweet she greets him!

Pelageya soared round him like a bird, singing softly and timidly:

People say a wond'rous thing:
Life with him you love is sweet.

Matvei's eyes grew heavy. Through a grey film he saw the wooden face of Sozont with its raised eyebrows and open mouth, and the long lean form of Pushkaryov swaying back and forth in the doorway like a pendulum; in front of him splashes of blue and yellow merged in a bright whirl, and this, combined with the gay music of the *gusli* and guitar, the strains of the song, and the tapping of heels, made him giddy. For some reason he felt uneasy. Never before had he seen his father dance. He was glad, yet the sight caused him some embarrassment and he wished the dance would end.

"Master," came the dreary voice of Sozont, the yard porter, through the noise, "some people have gathered outside and want to watch. Master! I tell you some people have gathered outside. . . ."

"Chase them away," said Kozhemyakin hoarsely, stopping to wipe the sweat off his face.

"They're grumbling."

"Chase them away, I tell you! People? Pigs! Do you call them people?"

"We can't do anything with them. There's five of us, but still—"

"Be off!" cried Kozhemyakin, his face darkening.

Pelageya came and sat down next to Matvei.

"See how bold I've grown!" she said with a shy smile.

Suddenly he threw his arms round her neck and kissed her cheek.

"Don't be afraid. . . . We'll be together . . ." he whispered incoherently.

"Thank you, Matvei," she whispered back, kissing him on the forehead and shedding tears again. "God knows I'll do my best by you."

"Look, Savely!" cried the doctor. "Oho!"

The boy looked up: his father was standing in front of him with a broad grin on his face; Pushkaryov was still swaying in the doorway, as dark and flat as if carved out of a weather-beaten board; the barrel-like doctor was laughing so loudly that his little slits of eyes had quite disappeared, and the rough-hewn face of the deacon, too, was distorted with laughter.

"Look at that, now!" shouted Markov. "He can't wait, the young one can't!"

"And a very good thing," said Kozhemyakin with a little laugh.

Pelageya turned pale and blinked in perplexity.

"He kissed me first . . ." she murmured.

Ashamed, Matvei pressed close to her and began to cry. On seeing this Pushkaryov seized him by the hand.

"Make way, you filthy-minded beasts!" he shouted as he led Matvei off to bed, saying to him as he went, "Don't pay any attention to those fools."

For a long time the shouts, the tapping of heels and the clatter of dishes kept Matvei awake. At this distance there was something sad in the music of the strings. Shadows and a quiet rustle crept through the open window, and then he heard a vague mutter, as if two dogs, a big one and a little one, were snarling at each other.

"It's a shame. . . ."

"Oh, dear. . . ."

The boy stole to the window and peered cautiously over the sill. He saw Vlasyevna sitting on the bench under the bird-cherry, her hair rumpled, her shoulders bare and shaking. Beside her Sozont, with a pipe in his mouth, sat leaning over, staring at the ground. Both of them were covered by a moving web of shadow that seemed to be trying to catch them in its meshes.

"What kind of a wife will she make him?" wailed Vlasyevna softly.

"I told you it was a shame," said the porter gloomily.

Shreds of cloud sailed slowly across the sky, their ragged edges gilded by the moon that came rolling up behind them. A delicate filigree of lime and bird-cherry branches waved gently in the breeze and everything—the orchard, the house, and the sky—seemed to be whirling in a slow dance.

Life in the house became drearier than ever after the wedding. It was as if Matvei's father had been rubbed down with a rich ointment, so suave and smooth was he. He paced the floor, smiling unctuously into his beard, his hands behind his back, purring to himself like a well-fed cat, turning a blank gaze on people as if trying to remember who they were. Matvei feared his father was about to fall ill again. His red face had turned purple, there were big pouches under his eyes, and he dragged his feet heavily across the floor. Pelageya sat at the window hour after hour gazing out into the garden, sucking liquorice or

peppermint drops which she kept inside her fancy sarafan, or chewing sunflower seeds or roasted nuts.

"Have some nuts?" she would ask Matvei whenever he came near.

He did not know what to say to her and she herself was not much of a conversationalist. To all his questions she would reply with a smile:

"Yes. No. Very well."

Sometimes she would bring all her gowns into the room and spend hours trying them on, languidly changing from a blue to a pink one, or from a pink to a red, then she would sit down at the window again and large tears would steal almost imperceptibly down her cheeks without changing the pensive expression of her kindly face. Matvei's room was next to his father's, and at night he could sometimes hear his stepmother weeping. He felt sorry for her.

"Why are you always crying?" he once asked her.

"Am I?" she asked in surprise, putting a hand to her cheek. "Dear me!" she murmured with a self-conscious smile.

"Why do you cry?"

"I don't know. Just a habit."

Almost invariably when Matvei sat with her they would be joined by his father, resplendent in soft-soled boots, wide black trousers, and a bright blouse, red or blue, held in by a silk girdle made by the convent nuns, who had woven a prayer into the material.

His mood these days was mellow and affable. He would stroke his beard and say to his son:

"Not afraid of your stepmother any more, eh? Well, run along and play now."

He no longer went on long trips to the villages to buy hemp, or to the district town to sell his wares. He sent Pushkaryov in his stead.

"Father," his son once announced, "the men are asking for you at the works."

"Is Savka there?"

"Yes."

"Send him to me."

And Savka came: a sturdy, snub-nosed, broad-cheeked lad with faded yellow hair, like undyed flax, that hung in lank locks over his forehead and ears. His eyebrows were so sparse and white that they were almost invisible, making his pale round eyes look as though they were starting from their sockets. He stood in the doorway staring at Pelageya, his head jutting forward and his teeth bared in an idiotic grin, and as Matvei looked at him he fancied that if his father were to say, "Savka, eat the stove!" Savka would creep over to it and begin to crunch the tiles between his big yellow teeth.

Savka stuttered, and whenever he pronounced the word "Master" his left shoulder twitched and he drew out the syllables in a smacking, malicious way.

"Take your ugly mug out of here," said Kozhemyakin with a disgusted wave of his hand.

One day three of the townsmen came to see Matvei's father and one of them, a grey-haired, curly-headed man named Bazunov, said:

"We've decided—the leading citizens, that is—to do you the honour, Savely Ivanovich, of asking you to take charge of laying the foundations of the new church. True, you're an unruly sort, but since there's no stain on your reputation as a man of business, we've done you the honour—"

Savely Kozhemyakin sat listening with his elbows on the table, his lower lip protruding, a sneer on his face.

"How so, are there no other honest folk?" he asked when Bazunov had finished. "And you think it's an honour for me to give orders to a set of thieves, do you?"

"Come, now; who said you were to give orders?"

"I have no wish to mind a herd of swine, thank you."

"Why be abusive?"

Matvei's father got up and threw back his head.

"Go back where you came from! There's not one of you I care a snap of my fingers for, and I want none of your honours and blandishments!"

The townsmen got up and went out without a word, but Bazunov turned in the doorway to say:

"It's true what they say of you: a red face and a black soul."

Kozhemyakin saw them out with a roar of laughter and then got dead drunk. He shouted songs at the top of his voice and forced Pelageya to dance; when she pleaded tearfully that she could not dance without music, he hurled a pewter salt-cellar at her, missed her, and broke the glass frame of an icon.

By evening he was sober and walked in the orchard with his wife. Matvei overheard their conversation.

"You're a pretty woman; you should be more cheerful," said the man in a spiritless voice.

"I try, Savely Ivanovich. . . ."

As Matvei sat by the window he recalled the sneer on his father's face and the hard words he had spoken to the townsmen.

I wonder why, thought the boy.

Choosing a suitable moment some days later, he asked his father.

"Why did you turn them out, Father?"

Savely Kozhemyakin pushed his son gently away, gazed steadfastly into his eyes, and heaved a sigh.

"They're not my kind, son," he said. "There was a time when I tried to make friends with them, but they threw themselves on me like hounds on a fox. They made fine speeches, but I could see their sharp claws. So it was war. They robbed me like highwaymen—pay for this, pay for that—until my patience wore out. They stole my horse, killed my hog, made off with no end of my cocks and hens. And it wasn't enough for them to steal—they damaged my property out of pure mischief: I planted apple- and cherry-

trees, they broke the branches; I planted raspberries, they trampled them down; I set up beehives—they pushed them over. Twice they tried to set fire to my house. Once they would have succeeded if they'd chosen a better time, but it was just after rain, when all the barrels were full of water. We put it out easily. The second time I myself caught a certain gentleman with a potful of hot coals behind the storehouse; there he sat on his haunches blowing up the fire. Well, I let him have the whole potful on his head. Some of the coals must have got under his shirt, judging by his screams as he ran out into the field: Ooh-ow! Ooh-ow! It was a dark night and I could see the sparks flying out of him. Made me laugh. At night I used to guard my property, choose a good stout stick and go the rounds. Very frightening it was; even the stars winking through the branches were like enemy eyes."

He gave a good-natured laugh, but the next moment he resumed in a grave tone, shaking his head ruminatively:

"I built high fences with nails sticking out of the top. I bought four dogs, and they took a bite or two out of a few juicy calves. Two of them were sheep-dogs that would bring a man down if they leapt at his chest. But they poisoned the dogs. So now you see how it is. How could I have any use for them after all that?"

He paused and put his hand on his son's shoulder.

"But I try to forget it," he concluded in a lifeless tone, stifling a yawn. "It's a bore."

Matvei glanced up; his father was always using this word, and the boy was becoming more and more conscious of a boredom that hung like a stifling cloud over the house and everything round about.

All his life Matvei Savelyevich Kozhemyakin remembered the pleasant thrill of fear and mystery he experienced on the day he began his formal studies.

The entire household—his father, his stepmother, Push-

karyov, Sozont and even tearful, obsequious Vlasyevna—gathered in the boy's room while Deacon Korenev, kneeling in front of the icons, declaimed in solemn tones:

"We beseech our Lord Jesus Christ and his disciples Kuzma Damian and Andrei-the-First-to-be-Called, to illumine with divine light the heart of this child, that it may become fertile soil on which to sow the wisdom of words."

When he had finished praying he said gently but firmly:

"Now go and leave us alone."

He sat Matvei beside him on a bench by the window, put an arm round his shoulder, and bent down to search his face with loving eyes.

"Have no fear," he said softly. "Do not tremble. It is for good, not for evil, you are preparing yourself." Pointing to the garden, he exclaimed in the same gentle tone, "See what a beautiful day we have been given to begin on!"

Autumn had gilded the trees; the maples were wearing red leaves, the limes yellow ones. Red clusters of rowan berries swung from the branches and the thick pale green stalks of the hollyhocks were hung with withered leaves that looked like shreds of coloured silk. A scent of ripe apples, fennel, and newly-turned earth was wafted on the breeze. Laughter and gay cries came from the convent garden.

"What is learning?"

The quietness with which the question was put made the boy's heart contract with a foretaste of mystery, and he edged nearer to his teacher trustfully.

"Learning," said the deacon, stroking his pupil's hair, "is the means by which we acquaint our minds with events in the past, with life in the present, and with human dreams for the future. Learning, then, binds one man to another; in other words, it is a link connecting him with the world as a whole. Now let's see what that means.

"What are words? Words are the body of the human mind, just as these bodies, yours and mine, are the vesture

of the soul, no more and no less. Further: take a book, any book; it is written by a man who lived, let's say, a hundred years ago. What must we expect to find in his book? The imprint of a human mind that existed a hundred years ago and left for our edification all the treasure the man's soul accumulated in the course of a lifetime. And so we might say: books contain the souls of people who lived before our day or are still living; a book is, as it were, a man's account to the world at large of his deeds; it is the life record of a human soul. Is that clear?"

In his mind's eye Matvei saw a collection of ponderous clerical volumes in leather bindings and with brass clasps.

"Yes," he answered faintly.

"Are you tired?"

"Oh, no!" the boy hastened to assure him.

"I believe you. I can see you are going to get on famously."

His face lighted with a smile, he got up, and to his pupil's amazement, announced: "That's enough for the first time. Think over what I have said, and if something is not clear, ask me."

The deacon was right: his pupil was filled with a burning desire to learn, and he progressed with a speed that astounded everyone. Before winter set in he had mastered the primer, and when spring came they had read the Prayer Book and the Psalter. Twice a week, when the lesson was over, the deacon took up his *gusli* and sang psalms to his pupil:

Behold how good and how pleasant it is
For brethren to dwell together in unity!

More than once Matvei saw tears of ecstasy in his teacher's upturned eyes.

The deacon's favourite song was:

Oh Lord, thou hast searched me, and known me.
Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising.

His voice grew particularly strong and moving when he reached the words:

. . . Neither was any deceit in his mouth.

He drank, of course; went on drinking-bouts that lasted for weeks. They locked him up in the house, but he escaped and went wandering through the streets of the town, a thin grey form with a discoloured face and bloodshot eyes, waving his right hand, clutching a brick or a stone in his left, shouting at whomever he met:

"Loathsome creatures! With this stone shall I crush you like the veriest vermin!"

Some of the townsmen fled from him, others cursed him and reported him to the police, still others took him to their houses, where they gave him more drink and made him dance and sing, tormenting him as the devils tormented Isaac in the wilderness. Sometimes they beat him.

Matvei loved the deacon; he was not afraid of him even when he was drunk, he merely pitied him.

The second person to whom Matvei became attached was Pushkaryov.

One day, soon after Matvei had begun his studies, the old soldier found him sitting on the roof of the underground storehouse with his primer in his hands.

"Come, show us what the new primers are like," demanded Pushkaryov, seizing him by the leg. "*Iomud*? *Ostyak*?" he read, moving his stubbly jaws. "Think of that now!" He shook his head doubtfully, drew a deep breath, and said in a low voice: "More and more people are growing up in this Russia of ours, and that's a good thing, we need new hands. We old ones are tired, we've done our job, time we were having a rest. Let others take our place. A big land, ours, full of mountains and gullies and waste places. No end to it! Look out there, now. Weeds. What's the good of them? That's not what we want to plant. Food's what we need: peas, for instance. And hemp. And we need hands. What-

ever you do, it takes hands to do it: drain swamps, fill in gullies, level mountains, plough fields, sow seed so there's food for everybody. Russia's sorely in need of workmen."

He screwed up his eyes and cast an appraising glance about him, then he slapped the child on the knees and said: "If ever they think to lay hand on you, child, come to me. I'll hide you. You're too skinny to take a beating. I'm the fellow to ask if you want to know what a beating's like."

Matvei was quick at learning anything that interested him. Often the old soldier would hand him a piece of hemp and tell him to determine the strength of the fibre by touch and decide what sort of twist it required. Matvei was flattered by the old man's trust. Frowning importantly, he would press the fibre between his fingers, then state the number of revolutions of the wheel those particular strands required.

"Good for you!" Pushkaryov would cry happily, and launch on one of his endless discourses: "Time was when your father, too, would take up a handful, screw up his eyes and feel the weight of it. He never made a mistake about the twist; he knows his business, your father does."

"Why don't people like him?" Matvei once asked.

"Why should they?" retorted the old soldier in surprise. "What's special about him?" and Pushkaryov burst out laughing. But presently he grew grave and observed, after a moment's consideration, "They don't like anybody, the swine."

"Why not?"

"Who knows? Go and ask them. They don't know themselves."

"The Bible says we ought to love one another," said Matvei in an injured tone.

Pushkaryov glanced at him, wiped his face with a dirty hand, as though removing the smile, and said:

"The Bible says lots of things."

"Do *you* like him?" insisted Matvei.

"We-ell," said the soldier with a little laugh. "Every tree sings the praises of its own copse, as the saying goes. I like him well enough. I hold him in respect. He never hurts a body without cause, I will say that for him, and he knows a good workman when he sees one."

"Remember that time he hit you over the head with the flower pot?"

"The geranium? Ho, ho! He made a good job of it, didn't he? He makes a good job of everything. I was drunk that day, and when I'm drunk I start preaching to everybody. It's awful the way I go about telling people what to do. Once I tried it on our commander: You have no right, says I, to smash our faces in. That earned me a good drubbing, I can tell you!" He stopped, looked at Matvei out of the corner of his eye, cleared his throat, and said with sudden vivacity: "Here, I'll tell you a story you'll do well to remember. Once those in power decided that the peasants were to plant potatoes, and the peasants, being an ignorant lot, refused to. And there was no budging them. 'Devil's food!' they said whenever they were sent potatoes, and threw them into the gully, into the river, or the swamp—anywhere to get rid of them. That's what happened in Guslitsa (you know, the place where they make counterfeit money). And so they sent us soldiers to put down the potato riots. Our commander was a German. Gustav was his name, but we called him Ustav*—a big, burly fellow and uncommon severe. So he decides to whip the peasants. He lines a dozen of them up in the square in front of the church and beats them with *Spießruten*—special switches for beating people. To tell the truth they were just like any other switches, but the foreign name made them sound worse. So we whipped them. The peasants growled, but still wouldn't look at a potato. Ustav ordered us to boil a whole potful and make the peasants

* *Ustav*-the Russian word for "Rules and Regulations."-*Tr.*

who'd been whipped eat them. The peasants just shook their heads—'Not for the world,' they said. The German rams the hot potatoes into their mouths and shoves them down their gullets along with their front teeth. The peasants cough them up. I may be a soldier, but I couldn't help feeling sorry for the dunces. The women bawled, the children set up a howl, the men's mugs were smeared with blood—very nasty and shameful. What if they were only peasants? They were Russians, Christian folk. So that evening, after the 'secution—'secution that's a foreign word too; just plain 'whipping' in Russian—that evening I boiled a pot of potatoes and took it to the peasants in one of the huts. 'You boobies,' I says, 'look at these potatoes—like flour and water, or barley mash. Here am I, a plain soldier with a cross round my neck—in a word, a Christian.' And I showed them my cross, and a good one it was, silver and enamel. And I began to eat potatoes right in front of their eyes. When I finished my third and they could see I didn't blow up, one of the women—a young one—held out her hand as if she wanted me to give her one. I did; she took it, crossed herself, and handed it to one of the peasants, likely her husband. 'Eat it, Misha,' says she, 'and I'll take the sin on myself.' And she falls on her knees in front of him and starts to wail, 'Eat it, Misha; I couldn't bear to see them flog you again!' Misha looks at the old men, they turn their heads away and he swallows it down. Misha was followed by Grisha, Grisha by Tisha—in a word, they ate them all up. Natural enough, I was glad to have put an end to the potato riot, and I says, 'Not so bad, eh? Shall I bring some more?' 'Be so kind,' says they, 'Not everybody's tried them.' I goes straight to the corporal, Khaibula by name—a christened Tatar and a friend of mine, him and I always got thrashed together—and I tell him the whole story. 'Clever of you, Pushkaryov,' says he. 'I'll report it to the commander and you're sure to get a medal for it.' Him and me takes another lot of potatoes to the hut and the

peasants get out some wine. My, but we did have a feast! All of a sudden, in comes Ustav—as if he'd dropped out of the sky. 'What? You refuse to take orders from me and take them from a lousy *Soldat*?'—and he swears very comical in Russian. Next morning we got thrashed, Khaibula and me. Yes, we did. That's one thrashing I'll never forget, I can tell you!"

Tirelessly the old man's tongue kept digging up the bloody refuse of the past. As Matvei listened he was awed by the composure with which he spoke.

When he had finished the story he scraped at a spot of tar on the knee of his trousers, glanced sideways at the child, and said by way of explanation:

"If you treat people gentle, you can get round them, no matter how thick-skulled they are. But that father of yours—he's like those potatoes: suddenly comes a man, nobody knows who he is, and not a grain of respect in him for anybody or anything. And that Sozont—with his thievish face and thick tongue that can't do anything but growl. Who are they, those two? Where did they come from? Out of the sky, like a thunderbolt. The townsfolk here are thieves themselves. The things that went on here twenty years ago! Why, a man couldn't step out of his house and come back whole. They robbed a house over in Shikhan and said it was us living in the artisans' settlement that had done it. There's all sorts of thieves—some rob for pleasure, some out of need."

The old soldier's talk brought chaos into the child's soul. He felt crushed under the weight of these fearful tales of how men had their teeth knocked out, were flogged to death, and sold like cattle. In his father's stories, life was like a game or a fairy-tale; in the soldier's, it was an ordeal requiring that a man be patient and submissive. The boy could not reconcile these contradictory views. He felt no compassion for the masses of those who were thrashed, but he was tortured by doubts that wore him out until he

wanted only to sleep. He would hide away in some secluded corner where, after a futile effort to comprehend what he had heard, he would fall into a deep sleep haunted by nightmares.

During the lesson the deacon once said to him:

"See how quickly you've learned to write a fine hand! It would be a very good thing if now you sewed some paper together to make a copybook and wrote into it everything you found worthy of remembering. If you do this, first of all you will learn to express your thoughts, and secondly you will put your leisure time to good account. Everything that has to do with human beings is interesting and instructive and ought to be preserved for future generations."

The child accepted the suggestion enthusiastically and asked his father to buy him some good strong writing-paper, and the deacon to write "The Song of Venus" on the first page.

"That won't do," said Korenev, patting the child on the shoulder. "You must take this seriously; this is how you must see it: every task can be a pleasure, and every pleasure a task. First of all, we'll find a worthy inscription for your new book." After a moment's consideration he said, "Here, write this," and on the first page Matvei painstakingly inscribed with his quill pen:

"A collection of songs, stories and various events in the life of the town of Okurov, Vorgorod Province, which I, Matvei Kozhemyakin, gathered from the age of thirteen."

"And now write: 'In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.' And when you finish the book, you'll write 'Amen.' "

He took his pupil's chin in his hand, tipped back his head, and gazed into his eyes with the stern and loving glance of a mother as he said:

" 'Amen' means 'so be it.' And now let's write down a few sayings to give guidance to your mind."

The deacon's leonine face took on an expression of deep concentration, his eyes seemed to withdraw under his bent brows, and he raised a finger as if in warning:

"Here, write this in small letters in the margin: 'I do not pass judgement; I merely bear witness.' Good. And now, lower down: 'The life of man is fleeting, but his deeds may live through the ages.' Now, over here, on the right; try to keep your letters even:

The singing of the humble bird doth proclaim
That truth more wonderful than fiction is."

Having cast an approving eye over what was written, he said encouragingly:

"See how prettily the seeds of reason are scattered over this clean field! Each time you make an entry, first read this page. And now, if you wish, I'll write down that song I sang at the wedding."

And he did, in a large flowing hand, with many a loop and flourish.

Soon after this he vanished from the town. At the request of the townsfolk he was sent to a far monastery to do penance for his drunken and debauched life. Matvei wept when he heard of it and Savely Kozhemyakin, thrusting out his lip disdainfully, swore and muttered:

"Of course they had to get rid of him. He was taking the wrong path. And what path are you taking, you toads? Markov got so sick of you all he went off to live in a big town, and now this one's gone, too. You devils! Vasily a drunk! Why, when we were his age we drank by the pailful and yet nobody called us drunks."

Matvei went hard to work at his notebook, but that first page made it almost impossible for him to undertake the wise task set by the deacon. The elaborate calligraphy of the inscriptions made him hesitate to write anything

else for fear of spoiling the first impression. Once, after long deliberation, he began nervously writing on the back of the first page:

"Today Father told me about how the *burlaki* in Balakhna used to fight . . . ."

His fingers trembled, the pen shook, and suddenly a drop of sweat fell off his forehead on to the paper. He gave a gasp of despair: the ink ran and the letters put out little tails in all directions. Turning the page, he saw that the blot had gone through the paper and the phrase "but his deeds" had a spot underneath it the colour of the bruises underneath the workmen's eyes on Monday mornings. He was so chagrined that he decided not to touch the notebook again.

He made another in which he wrote down all the jingles he could remember Matveyevna having told him—about Maxim the Shy, ten feet high; and about Yeryoma and Feodosia; but the one he liked best of all was about the crow:

On the window a crow
Tapped with its toe.
"Wake up!" it said,
"Get out of bed!"

He could see this crow as a very proud and important bird, with a grey breast and glossy black head.

Several times he undertook to write down the stories his father told him, but he could not find the right words, the process of writing was tedious, and on paper the stories dragged out into something as drab as hempen rope.

When he was fifteen he looked older than his age. He was plump and stocky, with dark hair curling over a white forehead and a look of distrust in his brown eyes. Quiet and reserved, he had a thoughtful way of speaking and a sharp way of looking. Loneliness had done much to de-

velop his imagination; idleness and an excess of rich food had resulted in troubled sleep, headaches, and a heightened sensitiveness. Whenever he saw his stepmother's pink shoulders or strong, well-formed limbs he ran away from her. She always wore a meek and gentle smile and was ever silent and inconspicuous.

She lived like a cat. In the winter she sought warm dark corners to sit in, in the summer she hid away in the shadows of the garden. As she sewed or knitted she would purr a monotonous tune, and she called everybody, even her husband, by their first names and patronymics. The only exception was Vlasyevna, whom she called "Auntie."

Whenever she looked at Matvei she dropped her lashes and he, feeling embarrassed and at a loss for words in her presence, avoided being alone with her.

For some time Savka's attitude towards her had caused him anxiety. Whenever Savka came upon her unexpectedly in the kitchen or out in the yard he would stop dead, his whole body falling forward like a tree being felled, while a knife-thin slit of a smile would spread slowly to his ears, giving a glimpse of hungry bared teeth.

"M-m-mistress!"

"Good-morning," Pelageya would say, turning pale.

One day as Matvei was sorting hemp he heard Savka say:

"I have a free hand now! I'm my own boss now! So you need money, do you? Well, I daresay we can find it. I'm my own boss now!"

He became more familiar in his manner, he stuttered less, and his expressionless eyes seemed to grow bigger and to bulge more under his narrow forehead.

One hot summer's day Pushkaryov described to Matvei the burning of a Hungarian village. The villagers had rushed down the street in terror, sheep had bolted, cows had bellowed in their stalls, choked by the poisonous fumes, horses had broken out of their stables, dogs had

howled, hens had cackled, and a man in flames had dashed straight at the Russian soldiers who were hiding in the bushes outside the village.

"Couldn't you save him?" asked Matvei.

"Who, the Hungarian?" asked Pushkaryov in astonishment. "It was war, you little fool. We were the ones who set fire to the village, and you ask if we couldn't save him! We shot him, that's what we did!"

"Why? He'd have died anyhow."

"We were afraid," laughed the soldier. "He came running straight at us, yelling at the top of his lungs. The night was dark. True, there was no need to shoot him, our orders were just to set fire to the village and watch to see if there were any troops hidden there. We weren't to give the enemy sign or sound of ourselves. Me and a certain Tatar from Kazan set fire to it. They got him that night. Here's how it was: him and me set fire to the village and were crawling back when we see that man all in flames coming after us as if he was chasing us. We shoot him down, and then out of nowhere come their horsemen—fancy horsemen they've got, those Hungarians—and start slashing at us. Good lord, what a slaughter! That Tatar got his head split open down to the eyes, I got sliced on the shoulder and besides that a horse kicked me in the belly. I'll never forget that night, I can tell you! There were twenty of us and only six came out alive, and they were all cut about. They'd have done away with every last man of us if help hadn't come out of the woods. Ibrahim was that Tatar's name, and a fine fellow he was. There's nothing to beat the Tatars. No folk as honest as them. Here's what I say: when it comes to animals, dogs are best; when it comes to humans, Tatars. He used to call me 'Syapan'—couldn't say 'Stepan,' always called me Syapan. 'Hey, Syapan,' he'd say. A very comical fellow."

He told the boy many other things as he stood with the hot sun pouring down on his grey head and brown neck,

twitching his bony shoulders as if trying to shake off the stifling heat.

But Matvei could not take in any more—his reservoir of impressions was not very big and it easily overflowed. Workmen in blue sacking were moving about silently and languidly in the scorching sun, the taut grey twine quivered, the wheel creaked plaintively, and the stubby peasant Ivan rocked to and fro as he turned it. Stalks of sun-dried sorrel trembled in the still air. A haze hung over the hills, and a shepherd standing on one of the bald summits seemed to be suspended in space.

Two women were singing softly in the convent garden. One voice, thin as a silken thread, sang dolefully:

Throw wide the gates. . . .

And the other, deeper and stronger:

Throw wide the gates. . . .

Then both singers broke into a ringing laugh.

Matvei got up and went to the barn. He would have liked to drench himself with ice water from head to foot, or to thrust his head into some cool, dark corner where he would hear nothing, see nothing and think of nothing.

He climbed up on a cloud of soft hemp, lay down, and mentally went on with the song the nuns had been singing, recalling its words, which seemed to him cast in bronze:

Weighed down by a burden of sin. . . .

Suddenly he heard someone whispering softly and ardently:

"Where shall we go? Where, oh where, dear heart?"

It was Pelageya's voice, and someone answered in a flat voice:

"There's plenty of places on the earth. . . ."

"Savka!" thought Matvei with a sharp pang. Cautiously he lifted his head. There in the shadows quite close to him stood Pelageya and Sozont. He had his arm round her

shoulder and she, her head drooping to one side, was nervously fingering the hem of her apron and gazing into space. Her eyes, it seemed to Matvei, were green and cat-like. Fascinated by them, filled with recollections of his own dreams and Pushkaryov's candid remarks about women, he strained forward to watch and listen in sweet agitation.

Slowly Sozont ran his hands over the woman's body; she resisted him, averting her face and pushing his hands away with little defensive movements.

"Don't," she whispered.

Sozont's heavy breathing and Pelageya's sighs were twisted into a single skein of sound that included the creaking of the wheel outside the barn and Pushkaryov's incessant muttering:

"Ten into two, ten into three . . . Savka, you lazy devil!"

Matvei laughed to himself at the thought of the gaping Savka.

You got left, you fool! he said to himself gloatingly, yet with a sobering sense of injury.

Sozont gave his stepmother a little push with his shoulder, urging her into a dark corner of the big barn. As Matvei leaned forward in an effort to see them, he suddenly went sliding down the pile of hemp, noisily striking the floor with his heels.

Sozont rushed for the barn door bent almost double, while the woman, staring wide-eyed at her stepson, whimpered like a dog in its sleep.

Matvei went hot and cold with fear, shame, and pity for her. He made for the door with hanging head, but suddenly he felt himself held by two hot hands, and his cheek pressed against a warm, soft body.

"Don't go, dear boy, don't go," she pleaded in a guilty whisper. "And don't tell; for the love of Christ, don't tell. For your mother's sake, dear Matvei, dear motherless boy! Please don't tell!"

Tears dripped upon his cheek and the woman's arms tightened about him. Seized by a sweet longing, he nestled closer.

"After all, you're not little any more," the woman went on whispering hastily. "You can see that your father's old and ill, and I'm young and want to be loved. What will happen if you tell him, dear boy? He'll beat me, he'll be unhappy himself, and that other one—we have to think of him, too. I'll repay you, dear boy; just wait, when the women come to weed the garden. . . ."

It was as if he had been caught up by a scorching wind and was being carried away together with the woman. When he tried to free himself from her embrace she unlocked her arms gently and buttoned up her blouse with trembling fingers.

"Ah, well, God's your judge; go if you must," she said in a toneless voice.

"I won't tell," Matvei assured her softly. Feeling that she did not believe him, he said it again. "I won't tell, do you hear?"

Pelageya shrank until she looked amusingly small:

"Really?" she whispered, looking at him anxiously.

"Really," he replied, casting his eyes upwards, crossing his heart and taking her hand in his. "Only please don't go away."

"Ah, Matvei darling!"

She put her arms round him again and kissed him on cheek and forehead, her brimming eyes shining with joy. Then she led him away.

"Thank you, dear motherless boy!" she said in a deep, unfamiliar voice.

They sat down close together in the orchard, under a cherry-tree in which the sparrows were twittering as they pecked at the fruit. It was the end of June, and the limes were tinged with the gold of their blossoms, whose sweet fragrance went to Matvei's head.

"Sometimes," said Pelageya fervently, with a wave of

her fine white hand, "when I see you going about in your quiet way, as if you didn't belong in this world, I think to myself: He'll be following in the footsteps of his mother one of these days, poor lad, cheating some girl out of the joy of his love! We're all huddled together here like rabbits on an island with the river in spate—your father and me and that other one—each of us punished in his own way, like a blindness put on us."

Matvei found her flushed face unutterably beautiful at this moment, and her words as wise as the words of Deacon Korenev. His body was still quivering with excitement and shame, but he gazed trustfully into her eyes and longed to put his head on her round, sunburnt shoulder.

Suddenly his father's red beard appeared from nowhere. The boy jumped to his feet as if stung and Pelageya got up heavily, like an old woman.

"I woke up and called you—wanted you to bring me some kvass," muttered the old man, yawning and making the sign of the cross over his mouth. "What were you talking about?"

He was wearing a long Tatar blouse that exposed his bare calves, criss-crossed by swollen blue veins. His purple face with its nimbus of red hair glowed like a strange flower among bright foliage.

Matvei looked at his stepmother. Slender, fresh-cheeked, with a mouth as small as a child's, she stood with her hands crossed submissively on her breast. Slowly the colour drained out of her face.

"Who am I asking?" barked the man.

"She was telling me about . . . about . . ." answered Matvei, his eyes on the ground.

"About how the peasants lived and worked for the rich in Balymery," said Pelageya, drawing a deep breath.

"Oh, she'll tell you lots of things!" muttered Kozhemyakin, glaring at his wife out of the corner of his eye. Presently he sent her away to get the tea ready.

Matvei noticed the harsh look he had given her and racked his brains to think of something to say. But his father sat down on the bench with his bare legs spread wide and the angry, pursed lips relaxed in a smile.

"Well, what have you to say for yourself?" he asked.

"A titmouse has built a nest in the birch-tree behind the bath-house," lied Matvei, glancing fearfully at his father and thinking: He'll ask me to show it to him.

"That's a lie, son," said his father, yawning noisily. The trees shuddered as if fluttering their green wings, and seemed to soar higher into the sky. "If it was a titmouse it would make its nest in a tree with big strong leaves. A titmouse stitches its nest together, that's something you ought to know."

Matvei gave a little sigh of relief. He suddenly felt sorry for his father and ashamed of himself. The old man glanced round the orchard, ran his fingers through his beard, and raised his eyes in gratitude to heaven.

"The Lord must feel kindly towards the earth to have put such beauty into it."

He measured his son with his eye and sighed deeply:

"You're a big fellow now. A strange thing, that—the mystery of a man's growing up. No one notices how big a tree is in the summer-time, but in the spring, when it shakes out its finery—"

Pelageya called them in to tea. As they sat round the table his father began to praise Pushkaryov.

"A good man, Pushkaryov; hard as steel. And when it comes to working, he's a real friend, not like those others who snatch their rubles like branches off a birch, leaving the tree to die without caring. He told me the other day you had a good eye for the business. I believe him. You can always believe him. He'd rather bite out his tongue than tell a lie."

Matvei choked over the crumbs of the shortcake and Pelageya sighed noisily.

"He says to me," went on Kozhemyakin, " 'I want to repair my nephews' hut for him,' he says, 'could you pay me forty rubles in advance?' 'Here, take it,' says I. 'I'll give you a hundred if you want it, because,' says I, 'a good workman is as good as his master, and is half the success of the business.' "

The young boy stole sidelong glances at Pelageya and wondered at her composure; her pink, doll-like face was as meek and serene as ever; her eyes were prettily shaded by their long lashes; she was chewing her cake unhurriedly, without opening her mouth, and her red lips moved like flower petals in a breeze.

The water gurgled good-naturedly in the samovar, the steam let out a thin whistle as it escaped from under the lid, out in the orchard a robin was singing, and a scent of lime, mint, and black currant bushes was wafted through the window. Indoors, the charcoal gave out a fragrance as of incense, and this mingled with the smell of pastry and strong tea. Everything was quiet and peaceful and the soul of the boy, soothed by the bird song, and by the tints and odours of the declining day, expanded to receive his father's words with a mixed feeling of joy and guilt.

If I told him about Pelageya, he thought vaguely, she would be whipped and would cry, and he would shout at everybody like a wild beast.

"Nowadays," said Savely with a contemptuous little laugh, "the middle class is putting on airs: we're this and we're that, we've got everything sized up, we're townsfolk, you know, so it's us who are to run things. That's all nonsense, Matvei. We're all just labourers in the hire of Mother Russia. Pushkaryov knows that. More than once he's shouted at me: 'You think it's you I work for, you red-haired devil? Nothing of the sort! It's the tsar, it's Mother Russia I work for!' The townsfolk are afraid the peasants will squeeze them out. And true enough, now that the tsar has freed the peasant from serfdom, he may very

well squeeze the townsman out, as soon as he shakes himself free and sees what's what. There's a lot of free men in Russia now, thank the Lord. The townsfolk would be only too glad to buy serfs to work for them, but there's no hope of that. It's been said to everybody alike: Here, see what you can do as a free man."

Kozhemyakin brought his hand down hard on the table.

"These are good times to be living in, son," he cried with flashing eyes. "As for me, I lived more than forty years as a serf."

He narrowed his eyes and swept the room with a hawk-like glance.

"It's a great country, Russia, a good one, and a vast one, Matvei. I've been as far as the Black Sea. Sozont and I roamed about, seeing new places. A great country, Russia! And now that she's peopled with free men, now that she's begun a new way of life, set off along new paths—oh, there's nothing to stop her now!"

Pelageya gave a nervous little shrug of her shoulders and looked out of the window.

"My parents didn't live to see the happy day," she said quietly.

Matvei's father leaned forward, his chest on the table, and gave a hard little laugh.

"Did you know that her father was sold away from his family?" he asked Matvei. "Sold the father and kept the wife and child. He was a good peasant, her father. But he was a rebel, and so he got sent off to the Urals to work in the iron mines. The landlords got nasty towards the end, just before the emancipation, and took out their spite on their serfs."

"Especially the women and girls," put in Pelageya softly, wiping away a tear.

"Women and wine are always in demand when times are hard," said Kozhemyakin sagely. "But you mustn't judge all alike, Matvei: it's true the landlords did a lot of mis-

chief, and it's also true that many of them were as vicious as wild beasts; but there was some good men among them, and once a landlord was good, he was very good. The new noblemen didn't feel their feet firm on the land, and so they snatched and stole as much as they could, like our Bubnovs here. But there were others who felt themselves owners of the land from the beginning of time and had thought to stay so for ever, and so they tried to do good. But there was no point in it. A man sowing seed in a bog just swings his arm for nothing. Then there were peasants who spoilt the landlords themselves, like wormy mushrooms spoil whole ones if they lie beside them. Remember that Alexei who used to work for me—the tow-headed fellow? He told me once how he showed his loyalty. Old Bubnov's mistress began making up to Alexei. She was young and pretty and didn't have much joy of the old man—"

The blood rushed to the boy's face; he stole a glance at his stepmother and saw that her lips were tightly compressed and there was a new glint in her eye.

"So Alexei goes and tells his master," went on Kozhemyakin good-humouredly. "The master sends for her and sends for him and says, 'Thrash her, Alexei, my loyal slave!' And Alexei thrashes her till she falls down in a faint. 'What did you do that for? Didn't you like her?' I asks him. 'I liked her well enough,' says he, 'she was a good modest girl; I only wish the master would give me such a one to marry.' 'Then why did you tell on her?' says I. 'How could I help it? she belonged to the master,' says he." Kozhemyakin threw himself back in his chair and laughed. "I never could stand the fellow after that and kept finding fault with him for no good reason. I knew it was foolish but I couldn't help it—whenever I set eyes on him I'd shout at him. He'd just stand there, blinking and bowing; a foul creature. People like him do a lot of harm; they make you give rein to the beast in you, they set loose all a man's

devils. He had a meek look, but it made me want to smash his face in. I sacked him. 'Be off, Alexei,' I says to him, 'you're not to my taste; you curdle my blood.'

"There's lots of such trash among us and it'll be a long time before we get rid of them, oh, a good long time! They'll always find masters to serve because they've got no will of their own. Will—that's something deep down inside a man. The likes of him are meek, they're afraid to live on their own, they've got to have somebody else who'll answer for them to God and the tsar. They'll take nothing on their shoulders but the lash. They'll be sure to say when they come before the judgement seat: 'It wasn't me, Lord; so-and-so made me do it.' They're a bad lot, son; steer clear of them."

Old Kozhemyakin, his sharp eyes flashing, went on edifying his son with stories from the past until supper-time. A warm shadow wreathed round the boy's heart. These stories of the past were more interesting to him than the present; quietly and unobtrusively they took his mind off what was going on about him, soothing his spirit with the rhythm of the phrases and the ring of the words.

They had supper in the kitchen with the workmen, and there was never any lack of food. First they ate *okroshka*, a cold soup made of kvass with meat, hard-boiled eggs, pickles and onions chopped up in it and served with sour cream. Then they had two hot soups: either noodle soup and cabbage soup, or beetroot soup and mutton broth. This was followed by hot buttered cereal—buckwheat or millet. All this was topped off by sour milk or fruit pudding. On Sundays and holidays there were pies as well, filled with cabbage, or carrots, or hard-boiled eggs and onions, or buckwheat flavoured with fish oil. During periods of fasting they ate cold soup with fish instead of meat in it, a paste of oat flour, mushroom soup, peas, steamed turnips, beetroot, or rape served with treacle.

Matvei's father was fond of saying:

"The more food goes into you, the more work comes out of you."

Everyone ate from a single big wooden bowl. They sat up stiff and straight and no one said a word except Pushkaryov, who kept chattering like an old magpie.

The first person to dip his spoon into the bowl was the master. He was followed by the others according to age. The soup was eaten without touching the meat in it until the master gave the signal by striking the edge of the bowl with his spoon and saying:

"Help yourselves!"

If anyone took more than one piece of meat old Kozhemyakin would punish him by cracking him on the forehead with the bowl of his spoon. Pushkaryov's tanned and deeply-lined forehead took most of the cracks.

Chins and jaws worked ceaselessly, Adam's apples shuttled up and down, wolfish teeth flashed, steam rose off hairy chests, drops of sweat gleamed on faces. The eaters smacked their lips loudly and succulently, sighed with exhaustion, and licked their spoons with fat red tongues. When they got up from the table they crossed themselves repeatedly, turning their faces towards the icon corner, where the yellow flame of the icon-lamp winked above the sorrowful eyes of the Virgin, the high wrinkled brow of Nikola, and the anxious countenance of Christ. Having offered up a prayer, they bowed to the master of the house, murmuring in low voices:

"Thank you kindly for your bread and salt."

Matvei liked the solemn ritual of the dinners and suppers; he enjoyed seeing people gorging themselves; satiety changed the sullen expression of their faces to one of affability and brought smiles of satisfaction to their moist eyes. The thanks they offered for the foods came, as he saw, from an overflow of feeling, and he wished their eyes always wore such a friendly smile.

On this particular evening his father said, when he had run his eyes round the table:

"Where's Sozont?"

Savka fidgeted on his chair, opened his mouth, and let out a foolish "Ha, ha!"

"What's the meaning of that?" cried Kozhemyakin.

The wooden spoon trembled in Pelageya's hand and her face broke out in red blotches; the people round the table avoided one another's eyes; Matvei could see they all knew a secret. Eager to reassure his stepmother, he stroked her knee twice, in response to which she pressed closer to him.

Savka twisted his head from side to side and uttered incoherent sounds in his eagerness to tell what he knew.

"What are you squirming for?" asked Matvei's father sternly.

"He's gone away, ha, ha!" announced Savka joyfully. "He said to tell you he'd gone for good. I was riding down to the river to fetch the water when I met him coming along with a pack on his back, ha, ha!"

" 'If he's gone with his pack, he'll never come back,' " quoted Pushkaryov. "In other words, he's taken to the road again."

"Hm-m," murmured Kozhemyakin, lowering his eyes. "Didn't even say good-bye."

"In too much of a hurry," explained Pushkaryov. "We Russians are tramps by nature."

Matvei's father put down his spoon.

"I've seen plenty of such people—restless ones—in my day," he observed. "It's said they get the pine-finch's dream: there's a bird called the pine-finch that sings as if it was asleep, in a soft and dreamy way, though it's a big bird, quite as big as a woodpecker. It builds its nest at the crossings of roads, and nobody knows what it dreams about, but some people have the finch's dream, and when they do, they're done for. Off they go to roam the earth

in search of the place they dreamed of, and if they find it, they lie down and die."

The people at the table began to chew more slowly and smack their lips more quietly, and a shadow fell upon their faces.

"This is the third time Sozont has set out," mused Kozhemyakin. "Something tells me I'll never see him again. When he comes back I'll be gone."

The kitchen grew darker, the flames of the icon-lamp brighter, the eyes of the grieving Virgin more distinct.

When he had gone to bed, Matvei lay thinking of Sozont's ugly pitted face, the shifty glance of his watery eyes, and the dull, monotonous things he said:

"I want to go away. Why not? All we do here is pour nothingness into emptiness. If only I could get to the end sea—"

In his mind's eye the boy pictured a long dusty road with the black shadows of birch-trees weaving patterns across it and the lonely figure of a man walking silently along it, while the stars gazed gravely down on him and on the forest and on the far receding distances where dreams are stored.

Shortly after, his father went away to buy hemp, and early in the morning of the day after his departure Matvei was awakened by singing in the garden outside his window.

At dawning, Mother dear,
The birds begin to sing,
But nothing, Mother dear,
Can cheer my weary heart.

The song was interrupted by the voice of an old woman saying:

"Hush, girls! The master's son is sleeping in there!"

"High time he woke up!"

"Come, let's see what the young merchant looks like when he's asleep!"

There was a rustle at the window. Matvei lifted his head and caught sight of a pair of laughing eyes. He recalled his stepmother's promise, and a hot wave of longing swept over him. Ashamed, he pulled the blanket over his head.

"It's the weeders," he thought to himself.

"He's not alseep, girls!" someone laughed tauntingly outside the window.

He leaped out of bed and ran to the kitchen to wash, telling himself he must put on his best clothes. He had just filled his mouth with soapy water when Vlasyevna jerked him back to earth by murmuring mockingly:

"Just see how quick he's out of bed when he gets a sniff of a skirt! Have some milk?"

The offer of milk was an insult: here he was about to set out on a fabulous adventure, and she offered him milk, as if he were a calf! Without deigning to reply he ran, half-dressed, to wake up his stepmother. Noisily he rushed into the room, pulled back the curtains of her bed, and stopped suddenly, shutting his eyes.

"Get up," he said softly.

His eyes smarted and watered. The sun was already high in the sky and the golden light of morning poured in a majestic stream through the window, lighting up the bed, clothing the woman's half-naked body in living radiance.

She had tucked in the red calico quilt and lay sleeping with her hands under her head, her body, taut as a string, licked by the flames of the sun. Her naked breasts heaved gently, as if they were growing, with the little pink nipples straining upwards. It was shameful to look at them, but he could not tear his eyes away, and the sight brought a prickling sensation to his lips. The woman's face, shadowed by the curtains, had a new and unfamiliar look. The eyebrows were lifted, the lips parted, the nostrils quivered as if she were about to burst into tears. She emanated sorrow,

and this sorrow, together with the sunlight, was a stern pure coverlet drawn over the temptation of her nakedness, quenching the timid longing that stirred in the boy's blood and evoked new and unfamiliar feelings.

Matvei dropped the curtain and went quietly to his own room, where he sat down on the bed and tried to concentrate his mind on something, but he could think of nothing but the woman's breasts with the little pink buds straining towards the sun.

Silver motes danced in a ray of sunlight, and through the window came the sound of laughter, the clash of hoes, and the soft thud of falling earth.

Matvei went to the window and stood to one side, gazing out into the sun-drenched garden. Long stalks of dewy hollyhocks, thickly studded with yellow and mauve flowers, swayed gently in the breeze. The sparkling air was saturated with the smell of fennel, parsley and upturned earth.

Women were working between the rows, their heads tied in bright kerchiefs, their backs bent, giving a view of red, dirt-spattered feet and legs. So low were they bent that they seemed to be crawling on all fours and munching the grass like sheep. Their sunburnt arms flashed, their broad hips swayed, their skirts were tucked up into their belts, sometimes revealing big patches of nakedness, but Matvei seemed not to see them.

From time to time the weeders used obscene words which the boy knew, but which, Deacon Korenev had said, "It would be better not to know, lest they drown out the Holy Word chiming forth God's message."

Matvei thought of his father's fleshy, flaccid body, overgrown with red hair (when alone with him in the bathhouse he had found it too repulsive to look at) and beside it he saw his stepmother's body, white and pure as a cloud on a bright spring day, and the contrast roused a bitterness against his father.

He recalled words he had heard him speak jocularly soon after his marriage. Winking towards Pelageya, who was walking in the garden, he had said to Pushkaryov:

"A pretty piece, eh?"

"Not bad in the day-time," Pushkaryov had replied.

"Much better at night," his father had said with another wink. "But then, all women are better at night," and he had given a loud, coarse laugh.

Matvei had asked the soldier why women were better at night.

"Why?" Pushkaryov had laughed. "Because they're different at night." He made a face, spat, and added gravely: "There's lots of witches among them. They fly up the chimney, haven't you heard?"

"But the chimney's so narrow," faltered Matvei.

"Oh, that don't matter. Women's bones are soft. But you're too young to be talking about such things," he ended sternly.

Matvei was startled out of his reverie by hearing Pelageya say: "So here you are, watching the girls?" She laughed and put her hands on his shoulders. "Which one do you like best?"

"None of them," he replied, too thrilled to move. He was filled with a longing to embrace Pelageya and whisper soft words into her ear.

"Look, Natalya Tiunova's a fine wench," she said, glancing out of the window. "She's young and free. Four years ago her husband went off to Vorgorod and has never been heard of since. Just think, they married her to a widower before she was fifteen years old! Like throwing her under a grindstone."

He listened in silence, avoiding her eyes, fearful lest she should guess that he had seen her naked.

Despite his agitation, he was conscious that she was speaking in the same lifeless tone his father sometimes used. As they were having tea together he noticed that

she ate without appetite and that she was pale and her eyes were heavy.

"Aren't you feeling well?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," she said, "just depressed." With a swift glance at the door, she began to speak in a quick low voice: "I've been so afraid these last few days! Do you remember that night during supper? I was sure Savka knew everything. Merciful heavens! And I was frightened of you, too. May the Lord bless you for holding your tongue! You wait, I'll see you're rewarded for it."

She smiled and winked at him, but the youth found something artificial in both the smile and the words.

"I don't want any reward," he said, blushing.

"What an idea! Don't I know the dreams young men of your age have?"

"Don't say such things," murmured Matvei, lowering his eyes.

"Very well, I won't," she promised with another laugh. After a little pause she said simply: "I'd be glad if you sinned: I'd know something against you, too, and we'd be quits."

Before Matvei had time to answer, she began to whisper hurriedly, whimpering and swallowing back her tears like an old woman at prayers:

"I couldn't close my eyes all night for wondering where he'd gone. He's not young any more, his side was slashed open with a knife and two ribs were broken, he showed me. He lived here quietly, doing nobody any harm. He hasn't got a soul in the world. Where could he be? Oh, Matvei, I've done wrong by your father, I know that, but if you only knew how shameful it was for a young woman to live with an old man—how ugly! How it bears down on her soul! Dear boy! you're cleverer than I am, but I'll give you a word of advice: if you see your wife doesn't love you, let her go—let her go—"

Dropping her arms at her sides, she sank down in a despairing little heap.

"If only you were older!" she said.

"I understand everything," said Matvei, tapping the table lightly with his fingers.

"Everything? Not even the priest understands everything. I'd be glad if you just understood this: Sozont's not young either, but there's something special about him. Your father tells stories about the old days very well, but when Sozont tells them he gives me a glimpse of paradise!"

"Why, does he know how to talk at all?" asked Matvei, incredulous.

"That's how he won me," said the woman vehemently, and even her shoulders glowed. "When I listened to him telling a story I lost all track of time. I used to go to him behind the bath-house, under the birches, and he'd take me in his arms like a little child and begin a tale about different towns, and people, and about himself. God only knows why I never got caught, I always went back to your father in time. Sozont used to send me away, 'Go,' he'd say, 'it's time.' I'm so ignorant; I don't know anything, never been anywhere, walked the ten versts from Balymery to Okurov perhaps five times, and that's all. The only time I seem to live is when I'm day-dreaming or listening to tales. If only I had a child! But you can't raise wheat in stony soil."

She began to cry, and her very eyes seemed to melt, so copious were her tears. Not long before he would have put his arms round her and comforted her, perhaps even have kissed her, but now he was afraid.

He followed her about the house until dinner-time as a colt follows a mare, and every thought was crowded out of his mind by the image of the woman's body, naked except for the radiance of the sun.

During dinner the weeders sat across from him at table. Their sun-tanned cheeks and foreheads shone from having been scrubbed; their eyes were hazy and bloodshot from toil, and grew even hazier after eating the good food.

The girls giggled and exchanged winks and pushed their spoons into the bowl at random, striking against the workmen's spoons, disregarding, or, perhaps, not knowing, the rules for dipping into the bowl. Matvei found this very disagreeable.

The sight of Natalya's gluttonous thick-lipped mouth almost frightened him. She was the liveliest of all; her voice flowed on incessantly in a thick, sweet stream, and the men looked at her as chained dogs look at a bone that is beyond the reach of their shaggy paws.

Frequently the girls would let out little shrieks, at which Pelageya would say timidly:

"Not so loud, girls."

"Somebody pinched me," one of them would gasp.

The unwonted commotion at table, the immodest jests of the workmen, the shameless glances of the weeders, and, above all, Savka's rolling eyes, made Matvei indignant.

"Mother," he said, throwing down his spoon, "tell them to mind what they're doing. They seem to have forgotten they're at table."

He was instantly thrown into confusion by his own daring and did not raise his eyes for a minute or two, expecting someone to retort. But on hearing the voice of the young master everyone had become meek and silent; nothing was to be heard but the sounds of smacking lips and chewing jaws, the drawing of deep breaths, and the knocking of spoons against the edge of the bowl.

Matvei looked about him in amazement, and his amazement increased when, on rising from table, everyone stood aside respectfully to let him pass. Once more he blushed with shame, but this time the shame was mixed with pleasure –the pleasurable consciousness of his power over others.

On reaching his room, which was ablaze with noonday sun, he closed the shutters and lay down on the floor. In his mind's eye he saw his father's sharp little eyes and his hairy hands that everyone was afraid of.

As easy as all that! he thought. All you have to do is shout at people to make them obey you! How simple!

He fell sound asleep and woke up when it was almost evening. A red ray of sunlight coming through the shutters seemed to be melting in the heat of the room. Women were calling to each other in languid voices in the garden; he heard the lowing of the herd coming from the fields, the cackling of hens and the screeching of jackdaws.

With a feeling that something new had been born in him this day, he went out into the orchard and took a deep breath. The fragrant air went to his head and poured a delicious poison into his blood.

He loved such moments, when the whole heaven seemed to have invaded his breast and rays of sunlight flowed quiveringly through his veins; when his eyes were dimmed by a blue haze and his body, drunk with the smell of the soil, seemed to be dissolving, and he knew the sweet poignancy of being one with the earth.

Through a faint ringing in his ears he heard Pelageya cry in suppressed tones:

"Oh, what are you saying?"

Tossing back his head, he smiled and looked round, but his stepmother was not to be seen.

"Oh, no!" he heard her cry again. Her voice came from behind the bath-house. Four old birches whose trunks almost entwined formed a shady nook there.

Prompted by a sudden premonition of evil, he ran noiselessly through the raspberry patch and came to an abrupt halt on reaching the bath-house. He felt as if someone were gripping his heart in cold fingers. Under the birches stood Pelageya wringing her hands, while Savka, holding her by the elbows, was pouring words into her ear. His whisper was loud and distinct, but at first the boy could not make out what he was saying, so full of angry contempt for his stepmother was he. He fancied that her eyes

were starting out of her head like Savka's. At last he heard clearly what the man was saying.

"We're all free men now. The one who's got money is lord and master now."

He was working Pelageya's arms, now lifting them up, now pressing them against her body.

"Let me go," Pelageya kept saying. "Are you mad?"

"Make up your mind—I'll give you no peace. And as for pitying the old man, why should you? Who is he, anyway? Just sprinkle a little in his kvass—I'll give it to you—just the least little bit. Or you could bake it into his bread. You could do it to his son, too. . . ."

Matvei understood the meaning of the words; he had heard many accounts of people being poisoned by powders. He suddenly lost his head, snatched up a spade leaning against the bath-house wall, leaped forward, and struck Savka with it with all his might.

"Merciful heavens!" cried Pelageya, jumping aside.

Matvei lifted the spade again, but it was caught in mid air and torn out of his hands. A heavy blow in the stomach knocked the boy off his feet and plunged him into darkness. He was brought to by a sensation of pain: someone had stepped on his fingers.

He raised his head and sat up. A group of people near by were engaged in a tussle, snorting and waving their arms as if threshing corn. Heads were sticking up above the nails on top of the fence, and voices cried out encouragingly:

"Give it to him in the belly!"

"Under his shoulder-blades, the bastard!"

Pelageya was bending over Matvei but he could not understand what she was saying, so horrified was he by the sight of the men beating Savka, who was lying prone beside the fence, jerking his arms and legs as if swimming. A big jolly peasant named Mikhailo kept kicking Savka in the back with a heel as black and hard as a horse's hoof.

Kneeling beside the victim was a thickset good-natured lad named Ivan, who kept pounding him on the back of the neck as if trying to chop off his head with a blunt red fist.

Savka, his clothes torn to shreds, his body smeared with blood and dirt, dropped his head in the mud and cried shrilly:

"Stop! Oh, stop!"

"Turn him over and give him a punch in the heart!" came a voice from the fence.

"There are people with bellows in their arm-pits—beating won't hurt them, they've got no end of breath."

Pelageya, Pushkaryov and Natalya were tending Matvei. They put a wet cloth on his forehead and gave him something to drink, which he swallowed without taking his eyes off the appalling sight. He tried to say something, but he was struck dumb by pain and horror.

"Stop it!" he cried out at last.

"Mikhailo turned and looked at him.

"Yes, I suppose he's had enough," he agreed.

Savka crawled away, clutching at the fence-boards with fingers caked with mud formed of his blood and the earth. He looked like an uprooted stump, his limp legs the dragging roots, his shirt and trousers the shredded bark from under which a dark sap came oozing forth.

Mikhailo was standing next to Pelageya.

"You might treat us to a drink, mistress," he said with a smile.

"Drag the rascal into the bath-house!" cried Pushkaryov.

Matvei's heart ached, his hands trembled and he could hardly breathe for the spasms in his throat. He clutched his stepmother's hand and gazed pitifully at the people about him. Every word they spoke was like a sharp claw digging into his flesh.

"Stepan Fyodorovich," said Pelageya to Pushkaryov, "I wouldn't put him in the bath-house; he might get out in the night—he might—"

"Ha! so you're frightened, are you, you bitch!" someone shouted gleefully from the fence.

Matvei leaped up and began throwing lumps of earth at the spectators.

Four men took Savka by the arms and legs and carried him away like a sack of flour, bumping and scraping his back on the ground.

"Hold him higher," said Mikhailo gravely. "You'll scrape all the skin off him."

The workmen, the weeders and Vlasyevna had gathered in the orchard. Matvei stared at them without a word, feeling too shocked and despondent to speak. They conversed in loud voices, they laughed and joked. Not one of them appeared to be frightened or disgusted by the sight of blood or to be really angry with Savka. They made fun of him and boasted of the blows they had given him.

"He's a fool," said Ivan good-naturedly. "A sort of half-wit."

"He's always talking about freedom. Nothing but freedom."

"Hm. He hasn't grown up yet."

All of them were gayer and more vivacious than usual, as if they had finished a day's work and still felt fresh.

Matvei went into the kitchen, where he found Vlasyevna washing a bad scratch on Pelageya's left shoulder and breast.

"What in the world are we going to tell the master when he comes home?" Vlasyevna was saying.

"They trampled down the raspberry canes," said Pelageya. She caught sight of Matvei and quickly turned away.

"You here?—and me in this state!" she cried.

"It doesn't matter," soothed Vlasyevna. "He's still a baby."

Matvei wanted to give her a piece of his mind, but he gritted his teeth and went out on the porch, where he sat down on a step and fell to thinking.

It was quite in the order of things for people to fight. On holidays he had often seen drunken workmen pound each other to test their strength and powers. He had seen vicious fights when men, like mad dogs, had rolled in a formless mass over the ground, grinding their teeth in fury and rolling their wild, bloodshot eyes. Such fights had not frightened him. But today's fight had been different. Today he had seen men zealously, methodically, cold-bloodedly beating a man to death, taking the pleasure in it one takes in playing a game, and he was afraid. He was afraid of men who could calmly wipe their fingers, stained with the blood of a fellow-workman, on their trousers.

Natalya, yapping like a playful puppy, ran past him to empty a basket of weeds in the yard. She was trailed by a long dark shadow that excited vague and unwonted emotions in him.

Pelageya came out and sat down on the step above him.

"Did it hurt when Savka struck you?" she asked, putting her hand on his shoulder.

"No," he replied, unconsciously moving nearer and looking up into her pale downcast face. "Was it you who told them to beat him?"

"No, they did it themselves. I let out a cry as soon as I saw you. Oh, if you knew how dreadful you looked! He seized me by the throat and the men came running. They made short work of him. He was brutal to me, but still . . . do you think he'll get over it?"

Matvei looked up at the sky. In a little patch of blue next to the moon a golden star came out and began to twinkle. His eyes returned to his stepmother's face.

"If I bribed them with wine to kill him, do you think they would do it?" he asked.

"I do," she said with a sigh.

They were called in for supper. A fat grey-haired old woman nicknamed "Living Water" gave a vivid and detailed account of Savka's injuries and said he was moaning

"something dreadful" out in the bath-house. The men laughed as they listened to what they considered a gratifying account.

"That's all right," said Mikhailo in the tone of one who knew what he was talking about, "he'll get over it by morning. You should have seen the thrashing I took five years ago! That was something!"

All began talking at once, eagerly recounting stories of the beatings they had taken and given.

Are they really so wicked? thought Matvei, looking at them from under lowered brows.

Under cover of the talk, young Kuzma must have pinched Natalya, for she gave a stifled cry, threw down her spoon, and thrust her hands under the table.

"Stop it, you fiends!" cried Pushkaryov, giving both the boy and the girl a loud crack on the forehead with his spoon.

Everyone laughed, Matvei's stepmother murmured a complaint, and Natalya made odd little sounds in an attempt to smile, but her face only lengthened and froze in an expression of pain.

Matvei got up. He wanted to say something sharp that would make people ashamed of themselves and sorry for others. But no words came to him, and so he just stepped over the bench and went out of the kitchen.

"I can't bear it," he murmured as he went.

Once out in the yard he crouched in a corner near the gate and wept with impotent rage, fear, and indignation.

There Pelageya found him.

"Poor motherless lad!" she said as she drew him back into the house. "How they hurt you! And that was here, in your own house! What would they have done to you outside the gate?"

"I'd like to smash their mugs for them!" he cried, clinging to her. "Just wait till I'm old enough!"

The window of his room was open, and through the

crowns of the lime-trees, which were like fluffy transparent clouds, the moonlit sky shimmered. From the distance came the sound of singing and the beating of a tambourine. A bell was struck in the convent, and the brass let out a shrill wail.

Still holding his hand, Pelageya led him into his room and sat down beside the window. He put his head on her shoulder and was lulled by the sound of her voice.

"It would be different if I came from far off, but here everybody knows I'm just a fallen woman who used to be Bubnov's mistress, and that your father took me for a debt the master owed him. Nobody minds me or holds me in respect. A fine sort of mistress I make! They hardly ever even address me respectfully. I dare not go out and I have no friends. I might find some if your father would let me go out, but he puts no trust in me. And why should he, indeed? A used path is open to anyone, priest and devil alike, as the saying goes. That Savka—he's nothing but a boy, and yet he dares to tell me to poison his master. He wouldn't say such a thing to any other woman, but he can say what he likes to me, a black sheep. I'm so lonely! If only I had something to keep me busy!"

Tears sprang to her eyes and she moaned in her misery. Putting her arms round Matvei, she held his head to her breast and repeated:

"So lonely, so lonely."

Wingless thoughts clamoured within his breast. He realized with shame that he was again experiencing the excitement of the morning, but, lacking the strength to suppress it, he pressed his lips against her shoulder, breathing in the smell of her body.

"Dear boy," whispered Pelageya, "why were we born? What are we living for?"

Unconsciously he pressed closer, then suddenly started back.

"Did you prick yourself?" she asked innocently. "My

blouse got torn and I pinned it together and didn't have time to change it. Here, I'll take out the pin."

She leaned on the window-sill with her bosom exposed. Losing all control over himself, he sought her breast hungrily with his lips.

"What are you doing?" she whispered, pushing him away. "Stop it, Matvei!"

She struggled to her feet, murmuring reproachfully as she took his head in her hands: "See? You shouldn't have refused Natalya."

She moved away from the window and into the shadow.

"Go to bed and don't lock your door," she said in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Why?" he asked with a little shudder.

"Leave that to me."

She kissed him firmly on the forehead and went out, leaving him cowering in the corner, watching the shadows on the floor crawl towards him like a tangle of black snakes.

He glanced out of the window. The moonlit sky was gleaming softly.

"I must close the shutters... the mosquitoes..." he murmured to himself as in a dream.

But he only cowered closer to the wall and another shudder passed over him. Something rustled outside his door, then the door was opened cautiously and the blue light of the moon struck the face and form of Natalya as if trying to make her turn back.

A smile was frozen on her lips and her teeth glittered coldly. Her head was thrust forward and her eyes, like two sparks, flew round the room, searched the bed, stopped on discovering the youth in the corner, and pinned him to the wall. Slowly she advanced towards him as if floating on air, whispering as she came, and it seemed to him that the snake-like shadows leaped up off the floor, coiled round her knees, and threw themselves on her breast and face.

"Go away!" he said in a loud voice.

She paid no attention to him and came closer, her body smelling of earth, sweat and hay.

"Go away!" he cried out again when she was so near that he could have touched her.

"Mother!" he called hoarsely, stamping his foot.

He saw Natalya spring back and slam the door. Suddenly he was engulfed in a blackness that whirled him round and carried him away.

When he came to he was lying on the bed gasping from the sharp smell of vinegar and horse-radish, and Pelageya was sitting beside him.

"A dreadful day the Lord has sent us," he heard her say to Vlasyevna.

Vlasyevna was sitting with head averted, grating horse-radish.

"As if you were a mother to him!" she said in sugary accents. "Girls of your age are given in marriage to lads like him. In the village a fifteen-year-old boy is always betrothed to a woman much older. That's only natural, since the peasant is doomed to work his whole life long. Each tries to find some way to keep his back from breaking before its time."

"What am I to do?" whispered Pelageya, ignoring her words. "How shall I deny their slander? And now he's fallen ill with something."

Her frightened eyes grew darker, and her face was so drawn as to seem crushed. With a deep sigh she put her ear to Matvei's chest.

"Send Vlasyevna away," he whispered.

With a little gasp she straightened up and sat staring speechless at the wall for some time. Then she murmured in a faltering voice: "He seems to be asleep. You'd better go and lie down. I'll call you if I need you."

As soon as the cook had gone she bent over Matvei.

"Did that idiot of a girl frighten you?" she asked anxiously.

"No," he said, looking away shamefacedly, but adding, with a pride he himself could not account for: "She didn't even touch me."

"What happened?" asked Pelageya with eager curiosity, drawing closer.

When he had told her briefly, he ended by saying:

"Why did you send her here?"

"Well, you see—" she stammered, blushing and smiling. "After all, you—"

He heaved a deep sigh as he played with her fingers.

"I thought you'd come yourself."

She started back, blinking in astonishment, and her blush deepened.

"Sit here with me," said Matvei.

She laughed quietly, putting her hand over her mouth.

"Good gracious! What a thought came into my head!"

"What?"

"Nothing special," then, shaking her head cheerlessly and sighing deeply: "Foolishness."

"Who undressed me?" asked Matvei in embarrassment.

"We did. Why?"

He pulled the blanket round him, got up, and went to the window.

"Ought you to get up?" asked the woman anxiously, avoiding his eyes.

"I can't breathe," he whispered. "That horse-radish has got into my eyes."

The sky beyond the window was deep blue, a few stars glittered in the moonlight, and the leaves of the trees quivered as if trying to shake off their heavy silver coating. He could hear the gentle murmur of the night life of plants and grasses.

Both of them stood at the window for a long time without uttering a word.

"What are you thinking about?" Matvei asked at last.

"Your father will be coming home soon," said the woman slowly. "Tales about me will be poured into his ears from all sides, and what am I to say? Tell me that."

Matvei was flattered that she should ask his advice. He raised his eyebrows and said nothing. He had nothing to say. Then, to his own surprise, he asked:

"If they should say to Natalya, 'Go and sleep with Pushkaryov,' do you think she'd go?"

"If they paid her for it," replied Pelageya simply.

Matvei considered a moment.

"They spread nasty gossip about girls like that," he observed glumly.

"Yes, they spread nasty gossip about them," echoed Pelageya; then, switching to a nervous whisper: "Your father will come home and report it to the police, and they'll begin making a fuss, and oh, the shame and disgrace of it!"

"Listen," said Matvei, raising a finger.

The moon had slipped out of the sky by this time and a thick blanket of darkness had settled on the trees. The seven lights of King David's Chariot still burned dimly, and the golden dust of lesser stars was strewn upon the earth. Through the curtain of the raspberry bushes a dull light could be seen flickering in the window of the bath-house, as if the pane were being wiped with a yellow rag. They could hear someone rubbing against the fence, clutching at it, moaning softly, and spitting.

"Savka," whispered Pelageya, putting her hand to her breast.

"He's escaping," said Matvei, reviving. "Let him. Here, we'll open the gate for him, he won't be able to climb over the fence."

"He'll strike you!"

But Matvei was leaning far out of the window and whispering into the silence of the orchard:

"Go into the yard, Savka, I'll open the gate for you. Hurry!"

For a moment all was silent in the orchard, then a hoarse voice said:

"Give me some vodka."

Pelageya ran into the other room.

"I'll fetch it," she said.

Matvei quickly threw on some clothes and rushed out of the door and down to the gate, where he found Savka on his knees, gasping hoarsely and spitting. His head fell first to one side, then to the other, like a misshapen black ball without any face.

"O-oh!" he gasped as Matvei pushed back the bolt, "you threw yourself at me like a wildcat earlier, but you're afraid to now, eh?"

Matvei opened the gate slightly and peered into the empty street; he pictured in his mind the broken remains of this man crawling along it, leaving a trail of blood in his wake, and the dogs, wakened by the smell, rushing out and barking.

"They're frightened, the scum!" growled Savka. "If it wasn't for the police I wouldn't sneak away like this, I'd—"

Pelageya came running up and handed Matvei a glass. The smell of the vodka brought a snort from Savka and he clutched at the air.

"Where is it? I can't see it."

The darkness, and perhaps the swelling of his body, made him seem fantastically big. The glass was swallowed up in his enormous paws, which carried it upward and pressed it against a dark pulpy mass that could hardly have been called a human face.

He drank long, murmuring "umm, umm!"

When he finished he flung the glass away and struggled to his feet.

"Well, I'm off!" he said.

Matvei threw the gate wide open. Pelageya thrust something heavy tied up in a bit of woollen cloth into his hand.

"Give him this, it's money."

"Ah-h-h!" wailed Savka, on hearing her voice. "Money for my coffin, eh? Bah! If I wasn't afraid . . .! Here, let's have it. I know you live with that stepson of yours, Pelageya! And you're right—the old man'll die, and you'll still be the mistress."

He swayed in the gateway, clawing at the post as if he lacked the strength to step out into the street. But once he had taken the step, he said in a firmer, livelier voice, pounding on the gate with something he held in his hand:

"Don't lock the gate, you swine, or they'll guess it was you who let me out."

He's right, thought Matvei, and a spark of goodwill towards Savka flashed within him.

Pelageya, who was sitting on the porch step, covered her face with her hands, and Matvei could see her shoulders and breast heaving. She seemed to him as small and unprotected as a child.

From the site where the new church was under construction came the sound of the night-watchman's rattle, and presently this was followed by the clang of the iron disc hanging in the market-place, announcing that the night watch was over. The shadows faded and the sky turned a lighter blue, as if it were withdrawing from the earth.

"Come to bed," said Matvei, taking the woman firmly by the arm.

Her drooping figure, her faltering step and her submissiveness affected him and filled him with solicitude for her.

"Tired?" he said gently, feeling older and stronger than she.

She nodded. When they reached his father's room Matvei stroked her hand and said:

"Go to bed and sleep. I'm glad Savka got away."

"So am I," said Pelageya softly as she unfastened her sarafan.

With a sense of wonderment he gazed round the cool dark room, saw the wide bed heaped high with red pillows, and felt with pride that this woman belonged wholly to him.

"Bless you for defending me. What would I do without you?" whispered Pelageya, and the words increased his sense of strength and power. She was sitting on the bed in nothing but her shift, which looked transparent against the dark background of the quilt.

With parted lips he studied the contours of her body, and joyfully, without fear or shame, felt the blood coursing through his veins and his head growing giddy.

"But I'm afraid of you, too. You're no longer a child," came her soft, enticing voice. "And I like you better and better. Did you hear what Savka said? And Vlasyevna, too, says I'm no mother to you."

Matvei reached her side. Spreading her arms like wings, she gathered him to her breast and kissed him on the forehead:

"Good-night, dear one!" she said.

More than forty years of his life passed after that morning, yet every time Matvei Kozhemyakin recalled it, his aching, broken heart was filled with gratitude to fate which, in the form of this woman, had turned on him an ardent smile; and to God, who had punished him for his sin by sending him a life of hardship and loneliness, the life of a man scorned and spat upon by the strait-laced citizens of Okurov.

Well did he remember seeing, as he lay in bed weak with shame and love-making but full of proud joy, the flushed morning-face of the woman bending over him, smiling and weeping; her tears fell warmly upon his cheeks, ran into his eyes, and left their salt taste upon his lips, and

he heard her uttering strange words that sounded like a prayer:

"Let my grief be your joy, and my sin your solace; never shall I utter a word of complaint, and I shall take all the blame on myself before God and man, so grateful am I to you for flooding my whole being with your tenderness and bringing me comfort, dear heart, dear shrinking blossom. It is as if I had plunged into a stream and you had washed my soul clean. May God reward you for the tenderness you have shown me by giving you all the happiness the world has to offer. . . ."

Enthralled by mysterious charms, he lay smiling and playing with her hair, unable to find words to answer her, feeling that she was the mother and sister of his youth.

Into his mind, in bright and pompous array, came the wise words spoken by Deacon Korenev:

"Marriage is the spiritual merging of two creatures for the joint overcoming of the hardships of life, which daily, fiercely and relentlessly, sting the soul like venomous snakes."

He would have liked to have told Pelageya this, but she herself went on talking without pause, and it would have been a pity to interrupt the sweet flow of her speech.

The sky was bright with the dawning of a fair day. Outside the window the orchard, flooded with the rose-and-gold of morning, was pouring its fragrance into the air; the leaves were shaking themselves awake and stretching towards the sun; the crowns of the trees were swaying slowly and pensively, as if praying.

Golden patches of sunlight fell on the woman's white skin. She jumped up in fright.

"Dear Lord! Folks'll be getting up soon and raise a hue and cry: 'Savka's escaped!' They'll come to wake me up. Go away, quick!"

She looked strangely small, quick and compact, in her shift.

When he reached his own room, Matvei lay on the bed and shut his eyes, but before he had had a chance to fall asleep he heard Pushkaryov shouting out in the yard:

"You flat-footed idiot! You couldn't keep watch over your own head! What will Savely say to this? Be prepared to have your nose punched!"

His father's name was like a blast of cold air to the boy. He thought of his mocking greedy eyes, the supercilious thrust of his lower lip, and the red fingers of his puffy hands. Matvei squirmed and hid his head under the pillow.

His father was away for four days, and Matvei vividly remembered every minute of those days; he had the rare and wholesome faculty of remembering life's brightest moments.

They could not hide their sin: Matvei walked about pale and abstracted, like someone in a dream; Pelageya's porcelain-like face became more animated, her eyes were filled with a joyous benevolent light tinged with anxiety, and the full lips of her little mouth were constantly curved in a tender smile. She moved restlessly about the house and yard, eager that people should see her.

"Dear me, I quite forgot it!" she would cry out, slapping herself on the thigh.

Broad-faced Vlasyevna smiled meaningly; Pushkaryov rubbed the stubble on his chin briskly and snorted with displeasure, blowing out his cheeks.

While waiting for Pelageya one evening after supper Matvei overheard him talking to Vlasyevna in the kitchen:

"You're a fool."

"Maybe, but to commit a sin like that! With his own mother—!"

"Sorry it wasn't with you, eh? She's not his mother."

"Oh, isn't she? She's his father's wife."

"You dunce! Have they had any children?"

"What difference does that make? And you call yourself a soldier!"

"A plague on you!"

Matvei broke out in a cold sweat. When Pelageya came he told her what he had heard; she, too, paled, and a little shudder ran over her.

"Vlasyevna's sure to tell," she said with hanging head. "It was she who pushed me into your arms. She still hopes. After all, your father hasn't entirely given her up."

Matvei did not believe her, but she convinced him of the truth of her words.

"What do I care? Let them be together. It would be better for me. Have no fear, Matvei," she said, tossing her head and pressing him to her breast. "If only he leaves you alone! As for me, I've been beaten before, I know what it's like. The only thing I'm afraid of is a court trial. . . ." She considered a moment, then said in a lighter tone: "What do you think of Pushkaryov, Matvei? Isn't he a dear soul? And it's true, I'm no mother for you. I'm only five years older. As for being married, it wasn't even a real wedding. True, we went to the church, but we didn't go through all the ceremony. Nobody sang a song over me, and I didn't wail or even cry, and nothing was done according to custom. The priest married us because he was paid to, but we weren't married by my friends and relatives like in old times, like Russians are supposed to be. . . ."

"I'm afraid," said Matvei. "Perhaps we ought to run away. Let's, Pelageya."

She pressed him to her with unexpected force and kissed him on the chest, over the heart.

"My good, pure boy! May God bless you for your kind words," she said.

Her raised eyes filled with tears, like flowers with dew, and her face was twisted by a spasm of pain.

Frightened, he jumped up. But the moment had passed, and she soothed him with a kiss. When he had drowsed off in her arms, she laid his head gently on the pillow, made

the sign of the cross over him, and, putting one hand on her heart, bowed low to him.

Through his lowered lashes he saw her bow, and a sense of impending doom made him shudder.

The next morning he was awakened by Pushkaryov, looking more lowering and dishevelled than ever.

"Asleep?" he said. "You ought to be running away instead of sleeping."

"Where can I run to?" asked Matvei, not bothering to feign ignorance.

"That's it, where to?" said the soldier with a hopeless shake of his head. "Ah, lad, you've got yourself in a fine mess. They say man's instincts turn even the tsar into a slave, but that's as may be.... I'll tell you what: I've got a friend, a Tatar, who lives about forty versts from here," he said, pulling at one ear. "I'll give you a note to him—he can read. He buys eggs in the villages and sells them. You go and stay with him while I fight things out here at home. Poor Matvei! I do feel sorry for you!"

Pelageya came into the room, nodded to them, and stood framed in the doorway.

"There she is, the worthless wench," muttered the soldier, rubbing his cheek. Suddenly he opened his mouth like a screech-owl and burst out laughing.

"The devil take the two of you!"

He shook his mangy head, screwed up his eyes into knots of wrinkles, and belched out a spray of spittle.

"Listen!" said the woman, suddenly alert.

Through the garden window came a vague sound that gained in speed and volume as it drew nearer.

"Must be him," said Pushkaryov slowly. "Well, keep your head, my friend!"

Matvei felt as if some strong and invisible creature had caught him by the hands and feet with cold fingers and was

slowly stretching him out. Pelageya kept making the sign of the cross over him and murmuring:

"Lord, have mercy—Lord, have mercy—"

Uncombed, unwashed, his clothes awry, the boy rushed out into the yard at the very moment Kozhemyakin rode through the gate.

"Is everything all right?" was his father's rough salutation. Then he bent down, flushed with heat and grey with dust, to say to his son anxiously:

"What's the matter with you, eh? Not feeling well?"

Later, in Matvei's room, Pushkaryov spoke to his master at great length and with much waving of his arms. Kozhemyakin was sitting on the bed, hatless but still in his travelling-coat, and Pelageya was kneeling in the doorway, her shoulders drooping, her arms hanging limply at her sides.

"Beat me . . . beat me . . ." she kept saying.

A curious change came over the old man's big purple face. His cheeks grew as pale and puffy as dough, the whites and irises of his eyes ran together to form two hazy grey-green smudges, and his beard trembled. He kept crushing the visor of his cap in his red hands.

"Get out of here, you slut!" he barked, sliding one foot forward.

Getting up, he unfastened the collar of his blouse, went towards the door, struck the woman on the head with his fist, and pushed her over with his foot.

"Come with me, Pushkaryov," he said, stepping over her.

Pushkaryov followed him out, closing the door firmly behind him.

The old man could be heard shuffling noisily into his own room, casting off his clothes, flinging open the window and scraping a chair across the floor.

With his father gone, the boy breathed more easily and saw clearer. He bent over Pelageya and stroked her hair.

"Go away! Don't touch me!" she whispered in fright, shrinking back.

Everything that had happened up to this moment had been less dreadful than Matvei had anticipated, but he feared that present grace would only make future retribution all the more terrible.

The house was filled with an evil wrathful silence. Cloying shadows crept into the room. The day was changeful: over the Lyakhovskoye Bog hung a heavy grey cloud, feathery tufts of which broke loose and stole over the town, fingering walls and trees with their shadows, which crept through the yard, climbed in at the window, and spread over the floor. The house seemed to gulp them up eagerly, as if feeding on gloom and misery.

When they had been waiting for endless moments, they heard the soldier's voice distinctly through the thin partition. He was speaking as if he had been an eyewitness to Savka's assault on Matvei, and no doubt he had adopted this loud tone for their benefit.

"Did he hurt him badly?" asked Kozhemyakin in an expressionless voice.

"He complains of his belly—says his belly hurts him."

"Bless his heart! He's saying that so that your father won't touch you," whispered Pelageya happily.

"He was laid up for a long time," bellowed Pushkaryov, "and she kept watch over him day and night. He was in a bad way, the lad was, but he's got his father's constitution. And not only his constitution. Anyone can see he's your flesh and blood. As the saying goes: 'He's the master's son, not the common run.' "

"Don't try to soften things!" barked Kozhemyakin. "What's her relation to him, have you forgotten that?"

"Oho!" roared the soldier. "She's twenty and he's fifteen —that's her relation to him, and nothing more!"

"Get out! And send her in, and Mat— that is, send my son into the garden," growled Kozhemyakin.

"So now we've got to find a new porter—"

"Later."

"Listen, there's a Tatar of my acquaintance lives about forty versts from here, just the man we need—"

"Later, I tell you!"

"Send me to fetch him, and let me take Matvei with me."

"Pray for him, Matvei," whispered Pelageya solemnly. Raising her eyes, she began moving her lips noiselessly.

Matvei strained his ears.

"Very well," said his father.

"I won't go! Not for anything!" whispered Matvei.

"Dear boy!"

"We'll leave tomorrow," said the soldier.

"Better today," said Kozhemyakin.

"I've got some things to attend to first," said Pushkaryov.

"Pushkaryov—"

"Eh?"

"Things look bad."

"What looks so bad?"

"There's going to be talk in this town."

"So he's afraid of what people say," Matvei could not resist commenting.

"You can't blame him for that," sighed the woman.

"Oho!" cried Pushkaryov. "As if we didn't know those rumours! What you want to do is tie up the tongue of that cook of yours!"

"Why didn't you beat Savka to death and take his body to the swamp at night?"

"That would have been a fine thing! Well, I'm off. Remember the saying, Savely: 'A kind word's stronger than a fist.' "

"Get out!" shouted the old man.

The door of Matvei's room was opened and Pushkaryov thrust his head in.

"Go to your husband," he said in a loud voice, winking at Pelageya; then, in a whisper: "Pad yourself, you fool! Stuff something soft inside your dress."

Pelageya gave a little laugh, hugged and kissed Matvei without a word, and went out.

Pushkaryov took Matvei by the arm.

"Come along," he said.

"Will he beat her?" asked the boy unhappily.

"A little," said the soldier and added by way of consolation: "That's all right, she's still young. Women—they're hollow inside, they were made to take beatings. A man's insides are all tight together, but a woman's have got space between. She's something like a drum, a woman is."

Matvei, feeling helpless and hopeless, went out into the orchard where he flung himself down under an apple-tree and lay gazing up into the sky. There was a sound of distant thunder; shreads of cloud went floating past; a hot moist breeze shook the leaves.

"Boo-oo-om!" went the thunder with a muffled water-soaked sound.

Little grey thoughts went round and round in his brain like gnats in a ray of sunlight; ragged clouds kept moving purposefully to the south, taking the form of a hayrick enveloped in blue smoke, or a silvery pile of hemp, or an uprooted tree, or a pack of greyhounds. At one moment they were like an enormous bearded head, eyeless, with open mouth and pointed ears; at another, a ragged fur coat with long sleeves, one of which hung down towards the earth while the other floated out in the wind and smoke came pouring out of it.

Matvei realized that Pelageya was nearer and dearer to him than his father, and all his thoughts revolved about this realization like moths about a flame. He tried conscientiously to recall his father's smile, his wonderful tales of the past, all the good things Pushkaryov had said about

him, but nothing could eclipse or extinguish the maternal glance of Pelageya's dear eyes.

Anxiety for her made his heart contract and his throat go hot and dry. He fancied sharp thorns were springing up out of the ground, piercing him in the back and tearing his flesh.

Suddenly he caught sight of Pelageya. Dishevelled, her hair hanging loose, she was staggering towards the bathhouse. She was drawing the fingers of one hand through her flowing locks and winding the torn-out hair round the fingers of the other. Her face, so pale as to be almost blue, was distorted in an awful grimace, she stared into space as if blind, coughed softly, and kept turning her hand in the air as she twisted the hair round her fingers.

Matvei was catapulted to his feet by an upsurge of anger such as he had never known before.

"Did he hurt you?"

"It doesn't matter," she said gravely and simply. "You mustn't—"

She swayed and caught on to his shoulder, sobbing into his ear:

"Take Pushkaryov with you, don't go alone! He kicked me . . . in the belly . . . afraid I might be with child. . . ."

"Then let him beat me too!" cried Matvei, darting away.

Blindly, as though stunned, he ran into his father's room and threw himself on his dark form sprawling on a bench beside the table.

"Beat me too! Me too! Me!" he shouted, waving his fists in the air. But suddenly he went dumb, as if someone had struck him over the head. His father, his back against the table, had thrust a fat purple tongue out at him and was clawing the wood with the nails of his left hand, his left foot scraped across the floor as if seeking support, his right arm hung down heavily with the fingers of the hand curled up in a supplicatory way; his right eye, bleary and dead-looking, was charged with blood and tears, his left glittered

with a green light. The corners of his mouth twitched convulsively, and he blew out his cheeks to gasp:

"You bitch . . . bitch. . . ."

Matvei bolted out of the room and collided with Vlasyevna.

"Look out!" he heard her exclaim, then shriek: "Merciful heavens! He's killed him! His father!"

From that moment on the house was full of vain bustle and racking misery, which went on and on, sapping the boy's strength.

Pushkaryov rushed in like a creature possessed, seized Vlasyevna by the throat and shook her.

"Killed him? I'll teach you say such things!" he shouted.

"The blood—on the floor—"

"It's Pelageya's blood, not his! I ought to drag you down to the pond and drown you, that's the truth!"

"Don't bother about her," said Pelageya from the doorway, holding on to the jamb for support. "Call the priest—the doctor."

Kozhemyakin, now lying on the bed, kept blinking his wide-open left eye in which horror flashed fitfully, while the fingers of his left hand clutched at something invisible and intangible.

Workmen shuffled up the porch steps and into the house; Matvei skidded over the wet floor with bottles and towels in his hands. A little later he tried to help Pelageya undress his father, but he was so shocked by the sight of the man's paralyzed right side, limp and lifeless, livid and flabby, that he ran away.

The dark sky was lit up by the pale Okurov lightning as it tried to break through a thick bank of clouds. Big drops of summer rain splashed on trees, roofs and ground. It seemed anxious to have done with its task of sprinkling this dismal spot, so that it might carry its refreshing moisture to more promising regions. Thunder rolled, trees rustled, bright ribbons of water poured off the roof and

rushed through the yard to the gate in a muddy stream. A bobbin, carried away on the rushing stream, bumped into the gate-post and kept knocking against it as if begging to be let out into the street.

Pelageya came out, put her chin on Matvei's shoulder as horses do, and whispered in his ear:

"I'm afraid I'll have to go into a convent as your mother did, dear heart."

Someone knocked at the gate. Matvei heard the knock, but ignored it. The lively Mikhailo darted out of the barn and leaped like a goat round the puddles to the gate, which he opened to the little black priest and the carrot-haired deacon.

"A fine thing! Send for God's ministers and don't open the gates to them! Barbarians!" complained the priest in a loud voice as he stepped inside, holding up his cassock as a woman does her skirts.

When he had disappeared inside the house, Mikhailo, grunting pleasurably, untied his girdle and lifted up his blouse to let the rain pour down his back.

"Oh! Ah!" he squealed happily.

There was such sheer enjoyment in the sound that Matvei longed to run out into the rain himself, but Mikhailo, catching sight of him, turned and walked soberly into the barn.

Father is dying, the boy reminded himself. But try as he might, he could discover in his heart no feeling stronger than his desire to be with Pelageya.

The rain slackened, the clouds came to a standstill over the town and, shuddering as the blue gleam of distant lightning fell upon them, shook out the last few drops of water on the muddy earth. A crow cawed in praise of the rain.

Once again someone pounded on the gate and rattled the latch, at which an argument began in the barn:

"Go and open it."

"I opened to the priest."

"I'd have opened to the priest."

"You go, Vanya."

"Go yourself, Yakim."

Long and lanky Yakim came out of the barn, stared at the puddles, went round the first two, stepped into the third, decided it would be better to ignore them, and made directly for the gate at a leisurely pace.

A tall man in an absurd Cossack coat, striped trousers, and a hat with a cockade, stepped inside.

"Is this where the sick man is?"

Yakim scratched his navel as he pondered the question.

"The master, you mean? Where else should he be? He's there, in the house."

"Idiot," observed the man perfunctorily.

Matvei heaved a mournful sigh, feeling as if the thick grey clouds were sucking him into their depths.

"Come, come," said Pushkaryov from behind, slapping him on the shoulder. "It's not so bad. Paralysis. We had a captain once—Zemel-Lukov was his name—he was taken with it during a parade. Knocked him flat, it did."

"And did he die?"

"Oh, yes."

"And will Father die too?"

"Funny question," laughed the soldier, looking away. "Of course he will—and so will you and me. That's what we live for. Once the job's over, off we go."

Matvei reflected a moment.

"He beat Pelageya," he said resentfully.

"Mm, yes, he gave it to her all right," agreed the soldier. "Couldn't help it. The old fool's jealous of his women. It angered him, the red-haired old goat."

The soldier made a face, spat and smeared the spittle under his foot.

"But don't let it trouble you, she's a sturdy sow, is Pelageya," he added gently.

Matvei cast a furtive glance over his shoulder.

"Are you sorry about Father?" he asked in a whisper.

"I'm used to him," said Pushkaryov with a sigh. "He and I got on together. We respected each other. Friendship, my boy, doesn't grow in the woods like a mushroom. It's in the heart that friendship grows."

He walked off, raising his legs high like a crane and bringing them down in the mud with a loud splash.

Matvei was left standing alone in the entranceway.

He says nasty things about Father . . . and spits . . . but he's sorry for him. . . .

Pelageya came out to him.

"I can't stand up any longer," she said with an apologetic smile.

He took her into his room, and when she was lying on his bed he averted his eyes and walked away, repulsed by a familiar smell, warm and salty—the smell that had come from Savka after the men had beaten him.

"I oughtn't to lie on your bed," she murmured. "He kicked me so; must have smashed my insides."

Matvei glanced at her and suddenly realized with terrible clarity that she would die. The unnatural pallor of her face told him so, as did her sunken eyes and her blue lips, which might have been pasted on.

Without a word he buried his face in her bosom. Pelageya groaned and ran a dry tongue over her lips.

"Don't," she barely whispered. "I can't breathe."

A little later he was standing next to Pushkaryov beside his father's bed. The sick man's green eye glittered as he tugged at his son's hand and tried to say something.

"Pu . . . Push—"

The soldier pointed to himself.

"Me?" he said. "You mean me?"

"Ma—"

"Matvei? I'm to look after him? I know that without your telling me. Have no fears about that, Savely."

But the old man waved his hand.

"Pel . . . Pel . . . Con—"

"I see," said Pushkaryov. "I know. A convent."

The old man pushed away his son's hand and clutched at his heart, writhing and moaning, rolling his thick tongue, striking himself on the chest, and again seizing Matvei's hand in clammy fingers.

The left side of his body seemed striving to separate itself from the right, which lay gazing serenely with its dead eye at something beyond the ceiling. Matvei was horrified, but he did not feel sorry for his father; before his eyes floated the woman's face, pale and evanescent. The old man's breathing reminded him of the hissing of mushrooms being fried over the fire.

The priest and the doctor were standing by the window.

"Sturgeon's my favourite fish," the priest was saying. "I even dream of it nights."

The tall deacon was standing in front of the clock scraping the fly-spots off the face with his finger-nail. The buzzing of flies—big bluebottles—filled the room. Everything was coated with gloom, and everything had come to a standstill, as if in obedience to some unseen power.

In this way four dark, rainy days went by. On the third, the sick man had another stroke, and early in the morning of the fifth stout red-headed Savely Kozhemyakin died. No one witnessed his death. The nun who watched at his bedside had gone into the kitchen to have a glass of tea, and when Pushkaryov came in to take her place he found the old man with his head under the pillow.

"I said to him, 'Who are you hiding from?'—made a sort of a joke of it. 'Come out!' I said, and picked up the pillow. There he is, done for. Everything in place but his soul."

Matvei was gripped by an unspeakable fear of death, a sudden compassion for his father and dread of what would happen to Pelageya.

She did not get up. She lay tossing on the bed, delirious with fever, her belly swollen like a drum. Once or twice Matvei had caught sight of rags stained with thick dark blood lying in the corner, and he could not rid himself of their cloying smell.

On the rare occasions when her mind cleared, she would look at him guiltily and whisper:

"I'm so ill! And here in your room! Where do you sleep? Are you comfortable?"

They gave his father a fine funeral, with the church choir and all the priests in town participating. One of the choristers, fireman Klucharev, a man with an enormous close-cropped head and a pointed blue-black beard, sang louder than anybody else, and all the way to the graveyard he kept glancing at Matvei with a curiosity that the youth found disagreeable and depressing.

To his surprise, he overheard a few people make kindly remarks about his father.

"It goes without saying that the late departed was an uppish sharp-tongued man," said old Khryapov, who was walking behind Matvei in the funeral procession, "but he had a good heart. He sent hot buns to the prisoners every Saturday—"

"To the prisoners, that's true. Birds of a feather—"

"At Eastertide, eggs and cottage cheese; at Christmastide, meat–"

Having listed all the charities of the deceased, Khryapov added in the tone of a repentant sinner:

"True, he had no respect for his neighbours, but when you come down to it, why should he? If you take the way we live–hm, I can't say *that* deserves much respect."

"Who can say how many demons will assault our remains in the hour of our death?" said someone acrimoniously.

Next to Matvei walked the long-legged Pushkaryov, looking like a bird-house on a pole in his resurrected green uniform with gold braid on collar and cuffs, brass buttons down the front, and a big black patch on one arm. Now and again he would turn round, raise his arm and give the command:

"Silence!"

Everyone obeyed him.

When they began to lower the coffin into the sandy soil of Okurov and the black-bearded fireman opened his enormous red mouth to bawl with the abruptness of a gunshot, "E-ter-nal pe-e-eace . . .", Matvei fell to the ground, sobbing and laying his head on an unknown grave-mound bristling with dry grass. Pushkaryov's strong arms wrapped him round and pressed his cheek against the brass buttons, while, sniffling, he whispered snatches of words into his ear:

"Come, take yourself in hand. Obey orders, Matvei! I'm here, my boy, here at your side."

And all the way home, right up to the yard, the soldier kept on talking under his breath as he ploughed courageously through the clinging mud of Okurov:

"He was his own commander, he was. Oh, yes! He'd have done big things if he'd lived in some other place. How he could work, that red-haired devil! When he bought this house, for instance, he was roofer and carpenter, painter and stone-mason, all in one. There wasn't anything he couldn't do. And the orchard he planted! Every tree a beauty—no worms, no pests, clean bark. The nuns came to learn gardening from him. It's a great thing, lad, when you can teach folk useful skills. Many a time he's said: 'Not only trees and flowers, but people, too, ought to be an ornament to this earth.' He found time for everything, whetting his knife and kissing his wife. I used to say to him as a joke: 'See that wood over there, Savely? Go and cut it down by sunset.' Ah, yes; we lived in the right

way, lad, and you must live the same. Don't be afraid to differ with a man, but learn to read his heart."

On reaching home Matvei was ashamed to discover that he was hungry. He saw that the funeral feast would not begin for some time: the workmen had stayed in the cemetery to mount the cross on the grave, and only a few beggars had gathered so far. And so he stole a piece of bread from the table and went out into the orchard, where he hid behind the bath-house to eat it. He had a guilty feeling when he came back.

Never before had he been the centre of so much attention. Nine tables were laid in the yard. In the kitchen, Vlasyevna and Natalya were making pancakes, and the smell of sizzling fat poured in a thick stream through the window, making the beggars who clustered round it sniff with greedy impatience. There were several dozen beggars, whole and crippled, and Matvei found them as repulsive as vermin as they crawled, grey and silent, out of all the nooks and crannies. The yard seemed stuffed with rags, and the murmur of voices was like the purring of innumerable cats. Sickly-sweet smiles were thrown into Matvei's face from every side; his ears were assaulted by a treacly stream of condolences, by rapturous praises of his youth, good looks and fine clothes, by sighs and whispered prayers. He noticed eyes that had been mean and hostile assume an expression of humility, sorrow and tenderness as they fell upon him. Resenting the obvious falseness of it, he kept his own eyes on the ground.

The matted grey beards, the puffy red and yellow faces, the greedy hands that seemed to have eyes in their fingers reminded Matvei of the strange visions of the Pious Pilgrim as he crossed the Fields of Human Suffering. It was as if all the rubbish of the streets had been swept into the yard. Bits of broken bottles glittered among the debris, and the wind poked a squeamish finger among the decomposing mass.Only two or three forms, shrinking in corners,

gazed upon the scene abstractedly, as if pondering an insoluble problem of vast importance.

A pot-bellied creature with a clean-shaven face and starting eyes, round as coins and interlaced by little red veins, came hobbling over to Matvei. Waving a stubby arm in the air, he began to shout:

Vain, all vain our hopes and longings,
All too soon the Gleaner stark
O'er the fields will come a-scything,
Lay us in the coffin dark.

"He's a sham, lad," whispered someone into Matvei's ear. "He's not a holy man, he's a clerk who was exiled for embezzlement. Just look at him, the ugly louse! But we've got a genuine holy man among us."

"Good sir," whined the clerk in a loud voice, "lend ear to the pious hymns written by my uncle, a famous bard and court—"

But he was pushed aside to make way for a tall man ludicrously fashioned of sharp bones that seemed to have been carelessly sewn up in a sack of worn brown skin. His head was small and his sloping forehead overhung his eyes. He stood staring at the youth without blinking, as if he were blind.

"Sing, Alyosha! Sing us a song!" they cried to him.

He stood pawing the ground with one foot and murmuring incoherently:

Shin-Shan the beggarman,
Ran till he was out of breath,
Found a coin in a rusty can,
And bought himself a speedy death.

"Think upon these words," whispered someone in Matvei's ear. "Everything he says has deep meaning, everything, a purpose. He has made the great sacrifice; he, too, was once a merchant's son."

Matvei felt suffocated by the ill-smelling crowd, but suddenly a movement passed through it and openings appeared in the solid wall of human beings.

"To the tables, rabble! Quick!" cried the soldier.

Matvei longed to say that the beggars frightened and disgusted him and he would not sit at table with them, but instead he turned to Pushkaryov and said:

"Why do you push them about like that?"

"It won't hurt them."

"They pray for our souls."

"Mostly in pubs."

"Is there nothing you fear?" Matvei asked him.

"Me?"

The soldier rubbed his clean-shaven chin reflectively.

"I don't know. Never gave the matter much thought," he said.

At last Matvei told him his opinion of their guests.

"But you mustn't go away," said Pushkaryov, wrinkling his forehead. "It won't do to go against custom. Won't do at all."

Matvei shrank. He was ashamed of his attitude and was sorry he had told Pushkaryov.

He went in to see Pelageya. She was no longer delirious, but she had lost the use of her legs.

"I'm not pretty any more, am I?" she said wistfully.

"You're even prettier," he said.

She had become distressingly thin in twenty-four hours. Her nose was pinched, her cheeks were sallow and sunken, her cheek-bones stuck out sharply, her blue lips were spread wide and seemed to be glued to her teeth.

"Dear boy," she murmured, "you'll be left all alone, without a soul on earth. Cling to Pushkaryov; he's a good soul, even if he does come from the settlement. I don't know a better. If I could only speak to him about you . . . for one little minute. . . ."

Glad of an excuse to get away, he said he would go and fetch the soldier.

As soon as he had done so, he went out into the bath-house, where he climbed up on one of the shelves and sat huddled in a corner that reeked of damp wood and scalded birch leaves. Scarcely a week had passed since the bath-house had last been heated, yet the spiders had already woven a grey web over the window and hung their nets in every corner. As Matvei gazed at the fruits of their labour it occurred to him that his heart, too, was caught in a net—a net of inarticulate thoughts.

He heard Vlasyevna and Natalya call him, and he heard the deep hum of many voices in the yard; for some reason the blurred sound reminded him of the blobs of grease floating in the slop-tub. He felt an urge to go out into the fields and lie on his back in the weeds, gazing up at the swift flight of the grey clouds, harbingers of autumn, coming from the direction of the Lyakhovskoye Bog.

When the silence of the yard and the deepening shadows inside the bath-house told him that evening had come, he climbed down off the shelf, went out into the orchard, and came upon Pushkaryov sitting on a bench under an apple-tree. His head was sagging, his long legs were stretched out in front of him, he was clutching his knee-caps with his hands, and hiccuping loudly.

"Hm, so you ran away from the beggars!" he said, screwing up his eyes. "They're beneath you, eh? As for Pelageya—you can't fool me! She's a goner. He killed her, the devil—that dead father of yours. He had a scent for things, like a dog. A rare man! may his soul rest in peace. The main thing for him was a woman. This old cock got himself a hen, too, and if Savely didn't make me show her to him! I did, poor fool, and he gobbled her up before I knew what had happened."

Matvei touched his arm.

"Let's bury her properly, without any people," he urged.

"Pelageya?" cried the soldier, screwing up his eyes again. "We'll bury her in the most proper way. Next to him."

"Oh, no! Not next to him!"

"Next to him!" shouted the soldier. "Let her catch him up beyond the grave and stand beside him before the Lord. The Lord'll give it to him, the red-haired devil!"

"Don't swear," said Matvei.

The soldier stared at him a moment, then said with a shake of his head:

"Everybody going about spouting as if they were clever, but they're all fools. To hell with you!"

He grew more and more drunk and swayed so violently that it seemed he must surely dive head first on the ground and snap his skinny neck. But suddenly he drew up his legs without the least effort, examined them, laughed, put them up on the bench, and stretched himself out.

"And that's that!" he said.

So he's the man I'm to live with, thought Matvei, glancing over his shoulder.

Later on that evening Pelageya fell into a coma, and five days after the funeral of Savely Kozhemyakin, she died.

Matvei urged the old soldier to bury her quietly, without any feast. It was some time before Pushkaryov would consent, but at last he gave in, salving his conscience by sending three poods of meat, three poods of cakes and three hundred eggs to the prisoners in jail.

According to Matvei's wish she was buried as far as possible from Kozhemyakin's grave, in a secluded corner of the graveyard near the fence, among a lush growth of honeysuckle, dandelions and burdock. On the ninth day Matvei himself weeded the spot, cut down the bushes, and planted five birch-trees in the ground he had cleared: two at the head of her grave near the cross, one on each side, and one at the foot.

"Well, lad, now you're your own boss!" the soldier said to Matvei with affectionate severity. "Look out! By the way, here's our new yard porter. Hey, Shakir!"

A young Tatar stepped out with dignity from behind the house. He took off a cap trimmed with fox fur, grinned, and bowed.

"Look at him, the devil!" cried the soldier, slapping him approvingly on the shoulder and turning him round for the master's inspection as if he were a new horse. "Tough as iron. Ho-ho!"

The porter, laughing good-naturedly, twisted his head round in order not to take his slanting grey eyes off Matvei. He was wearing a blue homespun shirt reaching below the knees, a white apron, clean leg-bindings and new bast sandals, and he had a lavender skull-cap on his shaven head. He gave the impression of being new, clean and durable. There was a serious look in his eyes, he had high cheek-bones and his face was beautifully lengthened by a frame of curly dark beard that covered his cheeks from ear to chin and parted at his mouth to reveal firm, well-cut lips beneath a clipped moustache.

"Soldier, good man," he said, winking in the direction of Pushkaryov.

Matvei gave an uneasy laugh, not knowing what to say. Shakir, sensing his uneasiness, held out his hand.

"Your hand, master! We like each other; you like me; I like you."

Suddenly he seized Pushkaryov, lifted him up in the air, and carried him off.

"Ai-da! Ai-da!" he shouted as he went. "Show me board, show me broom, show me where all rig-roll!"

Matvei laughed, sighed, and went into the town.

In his father's lifetime he had often dreamt of the town. He had resented never being allowed to go out alone and had imagined town life full of mysterious temptations and gay diversions. And while his father had taken pains to

imbue him with distrust of all men, the feeling had not taken deep root in the young man's heart or diminished his interest in town life. Now that he was free to do as he pleased, he spent much time walking up and down the streets, casting a sharp and friendly eye upon everything the life of Okurov placed in his path.

He was struck by the fact that the inhabitants of Okurov never seemed to be in a hurry. They sauntered down the street, and on meeting acquaintances would stop and chat amicably.

Today as he went through the gate, Matvei saw two women in the empty street about ten houses away. One of them had a yoke over her shoulder with pails of water hanging from either end, the other had a bundle under one arm. As he came up to them he heard their dilatory talk. The one with the pails thrust her head forward as she shifted the yoke from one shoulder to the other.

"Here it is Thursday again," she said with a sigh.

"Ah, yes! How time flies!"

"Day after tomorrow's baking day."

"What sort of filling will you make?"

"It's the season for cabbage, or even carrots, but my man doesn't like carrot filling."

They cast sidelong glances at Matvei.

"You might drop into the Khryapovs," said the woman with the bundle. "They've killed a bull-calf; perhaps they'll sell you the liver. I do so love liver filling!"

Without taking her eyes off Matvei, the woman with the pails replied slowly, as if her mind were on something else:

"They'd sell their own children, those Khryapovs. Their calf was a sickly one, that must be why they killed it."

They put their heads together and began to whisper. Mottled shadows fell upon them from a bright cluster of autumn leaves showing over the top of the fence. A fat

crow perching on the roof cast a languid eye at them; hens were pecking industriously in the dust of the roadway; some sleek pigeons were waddling in the yard, glancing furtively at the gate from time to time to see if there might not be a cat lurking in its shadow. Sensing that the women were talking about him, Matvei quickened his steps. When he reached the end of the street he turned round and saw them still standing and watching him and shaking their heads.

A hay cart sailed slowly past, giving off an odour of mould. The weary horse lifted one leg after another, its head hanging low, its intelligent eyes fixed on the road, which was cluttered with bones, egg-shells, onion skins, and bits of dirty rag.

The space between the wheel-ruts was doused with swill and strewn with refuse. This was Okurov's dumping-ground. Waste-paper, however, was rarely to be seen here, and whenever the wind drove a piece of crumpled white paper down the street the sparrows, jays and hens flew up in fright: they were unused to this queer white object. A spiritless dog jogged along the street, another came out of a gateway, they sniffed, the first continued on its way, the second squatted down beside the gate, pointed its muzzle at the sky, and whined softly.

At the top of the grey watch-tower a fireman in an unbelted pink blouse was walking round and round, yawning and grunting. A hawk was circling in the air above the tower, and the sound of its hungry clucking fell upon the earth like scattered pebbles. Martlets were darting here and there; Nikodim, the half-witted cowherd, was blowing his pipe in the fields; the monastery bell was summoning people to vespers, and out of the garden gates came drab little old ladies, who went hobbling down the paths beside the fences.

It was as if this tranquil life were painted upon the earth in fading, evanescent colours; it lacked animation

and seemed reluctant to move quickly and decisively. The people appeared to be incapable of laughter and ignorant of cheerful words; apparently they found no joy in breathing in the crystal air of autumn, beholding the bright blue sky and walking upon the earth richly embroidered with the silk floss of the grasses.

On Streletskaya Street lived the town's best families: the Sukhobayevs, the Tolokonnikovs, the Khryapov brothers and the Maklakovs, all of them famous fighters and roisterers. Tall curly-headed old Bazunov lived there too. These people cast unfriendly looks upon young Kozhemyakin, barely returned his bows, and strutted along the narrow street with even more swagger than the other inhabitants. They spoke in loud imperious voices and on Sundays and holidays they would sit in their front gardens or on benches outside their gates and shout to their neighbours across the way.

"I only had the four, six and eight of trumps."

"You don't say! Were the cards marked?"

"He had a whole fistful, damn him! The ace, the king and the knave."

"Must have been marked."

"So it comes out I get twenty-nine and a half and he gets thirty-one."

In another place a voice called out:

"Why did you give Misha a drubbing, Vasily Petrovich?"

"The little imp smeared the cat's tail with cobbler's glue."

Shouts of laughter.

Samovars steamed away in the parlours or out in the front gardens on Sunday evenings, and the members of these prosperous families, dressed in their Sunday best, sat in a close ring round their tables drinking tea and eating freshly made jam and young honey. Pewter spoons clinked cheerfully, birds sang in cages on the window-sills, there was a hum of leisurely conversation, a smell of charcoal,

pies, hair-oil, icon-lamp oil and tar, and through a tangle of bushes the bright eyes of young girls could be glimpsed.

"Last night as I was coming home from vespers," someone was saying, "I see the fireman sprawling in the mud of the square—right in the middle."

"So that's why he didn't sing last night!"

"There he lies, smeared all over. Liza, move over."

The fathers of families indulged in more weighty talk:

"As soon as they did away with the farm-tax the peasant started drinking more than ever."

Handsome old Bazunov, sitting on a bench beside the gate, spoke of the new times in measured, well-turned phrases:

"Money's been made cheap by over-coining it. There was a time when a man could buy his meat for a quarter of a kopek, but today it takes three. . . ."

Bazunov was famous in the town for his knowledge of the past and for being able to recount tales in any form: narrative, dialogue, or poetry.

The people spoke of pious matters, they criticized officials in secret, and told one another of their dreams.

"I lay down for a little nap after dinner yesterday, and if my old grandad didn't appear to me. . . ."

"As for me, neighbour, I had a dream last night that I can't for the life of me account for: it was as if I was going past a white church and put up my hand to tip my cap, and off comes my head together with the cap, and there I am with my head in my hand, wondering what in the world to do next. . . ."

Glossy jays, unintimidated by human voices, hopped in the road and up on to the fences, cawing cheerfully to one another. The cry of a landrail came from far away over the fields, someone in the artisans' settlement was playing an accordion, a child was crying, the drunken

joiner Koptyev came staggering down the street, scraping his shoulder against the fence, sniffing resentfully and muttering to himself:

"My fault—all right, it's my fault—come on, beat me—come on, I say—"

The Okurov sun hung red and rayless in the western sky.

As young Kozhemyakin walked on, he envied these people the quiet flow of their lives. He wanted to approach them, sit at table with them, and listen to their circumstantial talk—talk so cluttered with detail that it was difficult to grasp its essence.

In passing the Maklakovs' front garden he caught sight of a girl's black eyes peering through the paling and heard her buzz like a wasp:

"Oo, the boy that was his stepmother's lover!"

He started, the girl stuck out her tongue at him and vanished.

Another time somebody called gaily from the window:

"Here comes the boy who has fits!"

What does she mean? wondered Matvei. He searched his memory until he recalled the time he had fainted. So everybody knows, he thought.

He did not resent it, but the hostility he encountered on every hand set him thinking.

One day, as he was passing the windows of the Bazunovs' house, he heard the following conversation:

"Savely Kozhemyakin's son is out for a stroll again."

"Why does he go wandering about like that?"

"Let him! Pigs like to go wandering about the streets."

"I can't stand those strollers, especially ones like him, who—"

Matvei did not wait to hear what he was like.

Of all the people in that street, he resented the police officer most. On Sundays he would sit at the window from noon till nightfall, smoking a pipe with a long stem, clear-

ing his throat fiercely and spitting out of the window. He shaved his chin but wore grey side whiskers that hung down like dewlaps, giving him a canine look. Matvei would tip his cap and bow politely.

"A-a-a-a Po-o-o!" would be the response.

Porechnaya Street was the promenade for priests and officials and their elaborately dressed womenfolk. There, too, the young man was greeted by keen interest in his person.

"I say, just look!" exclaimed a woman, no longer young, wearing a pink dress and a green hat trimmed with plumes and flowers.

"Would you like to kiss him?" asked the man in a grey hat and checked trousers accompanying her. "He smells of onions."

"Oh, dear! You do like your joke!"

"And eats hemp oil with his porridge."

And the checked man tapped the fence with his walking-stick and called out: "Hullo, fellow! Hullo, there!"

Matvei, frightened and indignant, turned quickly into the waste ground on which the new church was being built and sought refuge from curious glances behind a pile of bricks.

After that he took to wearing fashionable boots and had his father's fine shirts cut down for him, hoping in this way to acquire distinction and raise himself in the eyes of the townsfolk.

One day, on returning from mass, he heard a young girl say:

"Goodness gracious! Look how he's got himself up!"

"Like a jackanapes!" said another.

He felt that the windows of all the houses were staring at him in derision and the eyes of the people with suspicion and disapproval. From time to time a milder glance would flash upon him briefly, but this was rare, and he observed

that none but the old women showed him the least sympathy.

He loved to wander about Petukhov Hill. This was a pleasant place: the tiny houses, tied to one another by wattle fences, gazed meekly and placidly out over the quiet fields and hills, which in the spring were golden with buttercups and dandelions, in the summer brown-green as if covered with old damask, and in the dull days of the long winter silvery-white and invitingly soft. Far away beyond the hills rose the dark blue wall of the forest called Chornaya Ramen, thrusting the tips of its lofty pines into the grey billows of the clouds. The laughter of children at play came from the fields, the blows of coopers at work from the yards.

Here he found an enemy in the person of the cobbler Setunov. The old man spent most of his time on a bench under the window of his ramshackle hut with the red paint peeling off its shutters, twisting thongs, hammering one-inch nails into the heels of boots, coughing, wheezing and shouting jingles at the passers-by. He himself had a battered, eroded appearance, and his hut, with its crooked windows, leaky roof and shutters like red stains, looked as if it had just emerged from a fierce fight and was squatting on the ground for a rest. Whenever the cobbler caught sight of the young man in fine clothes coming down the street, he would cross his arms on his chest and begin to whistle shrilly, gazing idly into the blue distance until Matvei came up to him, when he would leap to his feet, bow low and murmur in a comically high voice:

"Begging your pardon, Your Highness; begging your pardon. . . ."

Or would say obsequiously:

"How d'ye do, Kangaroo; is there anything we can do for you?"

At first this amused Matvei, but soon the puny little man's jibes made him feel uncomfortable and apologetic.

"Up and down and round the town," chanted the cobbler one day.

It's true; why do I go roaming about? thought Matvei.

And he went to the graveyard to see how the birches he had planted on Pelageya's grave were getting on. He found that two had been stripped of their branches and one had been torn up by the roots and carried away. He planted new ones and added a young pine to them. He also had a fence built round the grave and a bench put inside the fence.

More and more often he retreated to this quiet spot overgrown with burdock and hedged in with elder and hawthorn bushes. There he would sit, going over in his mind all the impressions gathered in his walks about the town, while sparrows chirped in the bushes, clusters of red berries trembled on their stalks, yellow leaves fluttered to the ground, and boisterous flocks of goldfinches swooped down to feast on burdock seeds. It was pleasant to sit there and watch the big red sun slip majestically down into the bog, lavishly pouring its gold upon the bristling boughs of the pine-trees. The pale Okurov sky became a blaze of colour. Mountains of grey clouds were cleft by streams of yellow and purple; flames darted out of dark billows, only to be swallowed up in them again; molten gold flashed and flowed. The live tissue of the clouds brought forth monsters whose shaggy bodies were pierced by swords of sunlight. A black giant rose in the sky, holding out blood-red hands to the earth, but a huge snowbank descended upon him and he perished without a sound. A blue snake writhed in a river of flame until it, too, was consumed. Menacing mountains sprang up, cutting off the light and throwing massive shadows on the hills. A fiery finger pointed compassionately at the earth for a brief moment, as if to say:

"Pity it. Love it."

A burning tale of struggle and victory was being told by the western sky. A battle was being waged between light and darkness, while in the east, beyond Okurov, the hills stood stark and cold, bound by black chains of forest and the steel loops of the Putanitsa River, above which curled autumn's purple mists. Grey shadows crept over the town, holding it in a tight embrace; it seemed to shrink and gasp in fright, and the next moment it was as if the shadows had wiped it off the face of the earth, sweeping it into a cold pool of darkness.

As the youth watched autumn parade its bright raiment, he pondered on life, and he dreamed of meeting a kind and wise man, such as Deacon Korenev had been, with whom he could talk frankly about his fellow-men, his father, Pelageya and himself.

And perhaps, he thought, this man would have a daughter whom he would give to me in marriage.

Matvei had begun to be interested in girls. This was evident from his appearance, and more than once Okurov's other swains had taunted him cruelly for it. Almost every time he went out into the fields where the young people played games, he would be met by quips such as:

"Careful, there! You'll throw your eye out of joint!"

"You'd better go and consult Somikha, old man!"

"Not him; he knows everything!"

From Pushkaryov and the workmen Matvei had learned that Somikha was a fat and filthy woman who, for a bottle of vodka and a pound of biscuits, taught young people what they ought to know about love.

Even the little boys gave him no peace.

"The widower!" they shouted. "He lived with his stepmother!"

He would walk away without a word, pale and smiling in an embarrassed way. He was more puzzled than angered by their taunts.

What does it matter to them? he asked himself. If I have done wrong, it is God and my father I have offended, not them. Why should they care?

He never made any retort, and he could not know that it was his meekness, his embarrassed smiles, his pointless wandering about the town and his inability to approach people and make friends with them that made them treat him with the contempt shown to idiots, beggars and religious fanatics.

Imperceptibly his desire to comprehend this tranquil life, saturated as it was with boredom and an inexplicable cruelty, grew in him. He sensed in it a longing for something unknown. He felt that if he could bring order into all he heard and saw, if he could perceive true relationships and ponder them deeply, he would find an explanation of, and a justification for, all life's evil; and then a telling word would be born in his soul that would instantly enable him to understand his fellow-men and become one with them.

Some of the phenomena he observed were revolting. Early one morning, for instance, as he was standing watching the building of the new church, he saw some stone-masons throw a black dog into a cauldron of lime. The lime was boiling and seething, and quickly burnt out the dog's eyes and ate into its flesh. The poor beast gasped, yelped, and made convulsive efforts to swim out, but the workmen only laughed and hit it on the head with long stirring-sticks, pushing its gaping jaws back into the thick milk-white caustic.

"What are you doing that for?" asked Matvei.

"Why, is it your dog?" said a young fellow with a round red face and a moustache powdered with lime.

"No."

"Well, then, we're just doing it for fun," said the fellow with a good-natured laugh. "It's very funny, the way it tries to get out."

"It's just a stray dog," explained another. "Strays are always stupid. It fell in. We'd pull it out, but what's the use? It's blind by now. Let it die."

Matvei dropped his eyes and walked away in shame. He had seen this same workman, the fair-haired, snub-nosed one, call the dog over, pat it on the head, and kick it into the cauldron, shouting to his companions:

"Push it in!"

On another occasion he had seen the ex-clerk, Chernolaskin, now a religious fanatic, come trotting down the middle of the street on his short legs, splashing up mud on either side of him, while behind him came a band of small boys yelping and screeching like puppies. A few of them ran ahead, picked up handfuls of mud and hurled them into the old man's quivering face, aiming at his eyes, which had a haunted look and glowed with futile rage. He was spattered from head to foot, mud dripped off his flabby belly, which hung down almost to his knees. He leaped over the puddles, opening and closing his mouth like a fish, waving one hand in front of his face to protect his eyes and holding on to his belly with the other as if afraid of losing it. His stubby form darted here and there, his strength was giving out, and tears rolled down his dirty cheeks.

The little boys danced about him, shouting in chorus:

"Fish-eyed Chernolaskin! Sold his wife for a pocket-knife! Pot-bellied sot! Pot-bellied sot!"

Vague faces, all very much alike, appeared in the windows of the houses, and approving comments could be heard:

"Look, those youngsters are after that clerk again!"

"Why should you plague him?" Matvei asked a curly-headed boy with a freckled face.

"We've chased him all the way from the monastery," the child bragged.

"What for?"

"Just for fun."

"You ought to take pity on him," said Matvei softly, with a furtive glance about. "See how tired he is!"

"I'm tired too," admitted the youthful pursuer, wiping his sweaty face on his sleeve.

"We'd leave him alone if he was a real saint," said an older boy with a sharp nose and little mouse-like ears. "Then we'd have to pity him."

"We don't touch Alyosha," put in two or three others hastily.

"We only chase Chernolaskin and the Dog Mother."

The sharp-nosed little boy walked off a pace, and then turned, his hands on his hips, to say: "So you're Kozhemyakin's son? The one that lived with his stepmother?" and darted off.

At the end of Napolnaya Street stood the charred remains of a two-storeyed house. It had evidently burnt down a long time before. Rain and snow had washed most of the charcoal off the logs; only in the cracks and grooves could bits be seen sticking up like decayed teeth, while the tow protruding from between the logs was like tufts of beard.

The sky stared out of the broken windows of the roofless upper floor. Inside the house charred laths, beams, and door-posts, mingled in chaotic disorder; green patches of mould showed on the rotting wood; weeds had sprung up in the rubble; nettles, wormwood and feather-grass nodded at the windows. On one side of the house there was a garden in which charred willows stood; on the other, a yard whose outhouses had caved in.

On sunny days the dark glint of the charcoal in the grooves was like the grin of black mouths. On rainy days rust-coloured tears streamed down the smooth logs. Boards had been nailed over the windows of the lower storey, rainbow-hued panes could be seen behind the boards and,

behind the panes, darkness. In this darkness lived the Dog Mother.

Tall and erect, she walked about the town barefooted, her head and shoulders wrapped in a warm grey shawl, her body encased in rags as a tree is encased in bark. The shawl was drawn low over her forehead and high over her chin, and the space between revealed a pair of owl-like eyes and a big nose that might have been cast in iron. She had a firm tread and measured her path by swinging a stout walnut stick as she went. She knocked on windows imperiously, and when they were opened to her demanded in a gruff voice:

"Give me something."

She was always trailed by a pack of dogs: dignified old mongrels with bald spots on their coats and grey whiskers bristling on their imperturbable muzzles; dingy hounds with burrs and clumps of mud clinging to their coats, and with their tails between their legs as if they had long since lost all self-respect; lean bitches that rushed about poking inquisitive noses into everything; gay little puppies with lolling pink tongues and innocent round eyes. All of them were happily united by that sense of independence of human beings that is characteristic of most parasites; all of them lived with, and followed at the heels of, her who fed them from her alms in the presence of the very people from whom she received them.

The townsfolk were afraid of her; they said she trafficed with unclean spirits and that the house-goblins obeyed her will. At her bidding the cow would go dry, the devil would chase the horse round the yard at night and the hens would overstuff their gullets. It was even rumoured that she had the power of strewing fevers, tumours, and withered limbs on the wind to infect human beings.

They gave her alms generously, without comment and without asking anything in return. And if anyone should forget and say, "Take it and say a prayer for the repose

of the soul of . . ." the Dog Mother would throw the donation to the dogs and mutter angrily, "A lot I care about souls!"

Matvei knew her story; he had heard Vlasyevna tell Pelageya that many years before one of the rich Voyevodins had brought her as a young girl to Okurov, bought her a house, lived with her a little while and then left her. After that, various officials had used her for their pleasure. On growing old and ailing she had decided to atone for the sins of her youth by making dogs her sole companions for the rest of her life.

Matvei remembered Pelageya having said in pensive tones:

"Perhaps she decided that because she was sick of human beings."

"Good heavens, what are you saying? Aren't humans the creations of the Lord?"

"And isn't she?"

"Who?"

"That woman."

Vlasyevna launched on an edifying exposition of the difference between dogs, humans and the Dog Mother, and as Matvei listened he recalled the contemptuous curl of his father's lower lip.

Street urchins always followed the Dog Mother and threw stones at her from a safe distance, but on reaching a blind alley, a piece of waste ground, or a dark corner, they would come crowding round her.

"Show us your yellow ticket, Dog Mother! Show us your yellow ticket!"

And she would pull up her skirts and show them her yellow legs and hairy belly, and would utter three words in time to their shouts:

"Here's—my—ticket!"

The urchins would give shrieks of laughter and hurl stones and mud at her, in response to which she would

confront them and repeat, without so much as blinking her owl-like eyes:

"Here's—my—ticket!"

On witnessing such a scene, grown-ups would sometimes say to the boys:

"Well, did you get an eyeful? Serves you right, you scamps!"

Whenever she exposed herself so viciously and shamelessly, Matvei would close his eyes in fear and horror. He fancied that all these dogs and urchins had issued from that hairy yellow belly, which reminded him of the dismal hills encircling the town.

Almost every day he met the pious half-wit Alyosha in his long homespun shirt, open down the front to show his bare chest with the big brass cross hanging on it. He would be rushing along the street with his skinny body bent forward, his scraggy neck stretched out, his right hand thrust inside his girdle, his left clutching a little block of wood which his fingers had polished by constant rubbing. He seemed to be forever pursuing some invisible object which kept eluding his grasp. He would come tottering along the wooden foot-path on shaky legs, muttering with a dry tongue:

"Beware, take care, God's creatures!"

Grown-ups always made way for him, urchins leapt aside in fright if they happened to run into him and scattered without a word if he made for them. Even the brave policeman Ankudin Cheremis, who could subdue three workmen single-handed when they were in their cups or beating their wives or quarrelling over a game—even the brave Ankudin made a point of walking round Alyosha.

On market days Matvei would wander down to the market-place to listen to the quarrels between the townsfolk and the peasants. The peasants were stocky and bearded, like stumps overgrown with moss; in comparison, the

townsmen seemed as little and nervous as the rats that worry a watchdog. A few of the townsfolk addressed the peasants in sugary voices, but most of them made no effort to disguise the contempt in which they held them.

Often Matvei overheard such remarks as:

"Dolts like you should never have been set free; it'll be your ruin."

"How much are your turnips?" Bazunov once asked.

"Fifteen kopeks a measure."

"Not so long ago you and your brats together sold for fifteen kopeks, and nobody bought you at that!"

"Ho, ho! Just listen to Bazunov!" guffawed the townsfolk.

Old Khryapov, bargaining for lime leaven, scolded a peasant in a voice that could be heard from one end of the market to the other:

"I wonder a thief like you isn't afraid of the wrath of God! Ten kopeks! Do you know what ten kopeks is?"

All the townsfolk expressed their indignation at the greed of the peasants and said emancipation was spoiling them. In addressing old peasants they often called them teat-suckers. Oaths and ugly words flitted like bats through the air and the brilliant colours of the market-place seemed to be bleached by the caustic vapours of general hostility.

At the opening of the market the peasants were quiet; they did not react to the oaths, jeers or hypocritical blandishments of the townsfolk. They merely gazed about them in bored apathy, as if awaiting other people who would show a different attitude.

But after a visit or two to the pub, the peasants plucked up courage; they gave an oath for an oath, a jibe for a jibe; by noon most of them were tipsy and their arguments with their customers were often settled with fists. Then Lesnov, the market overseer, put in an appearance, as did Ankudin and his colleague Mokhoyedov. The drunks and rowdies were dispatched to the fire-house.

Respectable citizens would clear their throats impressively and say:

"You can't behave like that here; this isn't the backwoods!"

Matvei was struck by the number of obscene words people used, the offhand way in which they insulted one another and the indifference with which these insults were received. It seemed to him that the whole atmosphere of the market was permeated with enmity and mistrust, which acted as an intoxicant. All were afraid of being cheated, yet all were bent on cheating. In a word, in this little square between the fire-tower and the church belfry, within the little semicircle described by the low market stalls, was an assemblage of tribes, each of which was hostile to all the others. Among them went the beggars, crawling like worms, pressing themselves on all alike, and the false pathos of their supplications wreathed upwards above the shouts of the market-place:

"Good people, in the name of Christ. . . ."

The name of Christ was often mentioned in the heat of arguments; it sounded spiritless, like an ordinary word whose true significance everyone had forgotten.

On the ground beside one of the stalls sat three blind beggars, three dusty forms whose expressionless faces seemed chiselled out of porous stone. They stammered out a melancholy song with toothless jaws:

Weary, weary are our bones
And if our sins would set us free
We'd gladly lay us down and die.

Young Pyotr Tolokonnikov plucked at the red hairs on his upper lip as he regarded them.

"If it's death they want, why should they beg alms?" he said in a bass voice.

Vasya Khryapov, with a face like a polecat's, stared at them intently.

"Perhaps they're just putting it on," he mused aloud.

"Throw a handful of dust in their eyes," suggested tall ungainly Maklakov, who traded in icons, earthenware and accordions.

Vasya crept up on them and threw some of the grey dust of the road into their faces. The blind men stopped singing and calmly began to wipe their stone-like faces with the palms of their wrinkled hands: this, apparently, was not the first time their affliction had been put to such a test.

"None of your tricks! None of your mischief!" cried old Khryapov, pulling his son's hair.

"That Vasya hasn't got a grain of feeling in him!" said Tolokonnikov, winking at Maklakov.

These three were the greatest mischief-makers at the market: they caught stray dogs, tied tins to their tails and watched the frightened creatures rush wildly about, barking and whining, with the tins crashing behind them. On damp days they rubbed soap on the planks of the footpaths and delighted in watching the passers-by slip and fall. They made bundles of foul refuse and planted them in the road, laughing at the people who, taking them for lost purchases, soiled their hands and clothes by picking them up.

They took pleasure in uprooting young trees, wrecking the benches beside garden gates, knocking down birdhouses with well-aimed stones and throwing rotten eggs through open windows.

But these three were not the only ones who enjoyed doing mischief. Matvei knew that all the young people in the town had a passion for destroying things. In the spring they broke lilac and acacia bushes and blossoming appletrees. As soon as cherries, raspberries and vegetables ripened, orchards and gardens were plundered, and this went on all the summer, up to the second Sunday of Redemption, when owners gathered whatever apples remained on

their damaged trees, cursing the mischief-makers and forgetting that in their youth they had done the same thing.

Every day, during the bustle of morning, the hot silence of noon and the quiet murmur of evening, the shrieks and wails of children being punished could be heard. They were given slaps, pinches, cracks, whacks, smacks and fillips, they were thrashed with sticks and flogged with straps. Matvei, who had never experienced any of these things, thought of his father with gratitude.

Children who had been punished laughed at one another's misfortunes and they themselves struck and pummelled each other. They showed not the slightest pity for dumb animals. In the autumn, during the flight of the birds to the south, they caught innumerable song-birds and tortured them by shutting them up in tiny, dirty cages. In the spring they caught baby birds with nooses made of horsehair. Having fallen into such a trap, the birds would break their legs and even die in the struggle to free themselves.

The children, like the grown-ups, created the impression of being temporary residents to whom nothing was dear, nothing worth cherishing. Despite the crowdedness of the town there were many empty waste places. Almost all the yards were overgrown with weeds, the seeds of which were swept by the wind into the gardens, so that the vegetables had to be weeded two or three times a season. The fruit-trees in the orchards, covered with lichen, grew slowly, were crooked and bore little fruit.

But what hung most heavily on Matvei's heart was the attitude of the citizens of Okurov to women. With painful clarity it exposed the presence of something dire lurking in the souls of these people, something that he felt had imperceptibly left a smudge on his own soul, evoking thoughts that disturbed him and caused a painful tension of his muscles. As he watched the young people playing in the field adjoining the convent, he observed that

the boys took pleasure in injuring the girls. They would pinch them, punch them, and throw burrs in their plaits. When playing tag they would chase the girls into the nettles growing near the convent fence and knock them down in the stinging weeds. Almost invariably the tears of the girls made the boys laugh, and no matter what game was being played, the boys tried to hurt the girls and make a coarse show of their superior strength.

This last was particularly striking. At first Matvei found excuses for the savage extremities to which the Okurov young men went. On seeing them strut like cocks in front of the girls, spitting out the husks of sunflower seeds on their skirts and jostling them with their elbows in a way designed to touch their breasts, he would inwardly laugh to himself and say, not without envy: How they do show off!

The women fought among themselves furiously, with fierce, unwholesome venom. Mothers beat their daughters, mothers-in-law beat their daughters-in-law. They quarrelled in the gardens, over fences, at the gates, in the street, in the market, in the churchyard. Any trifle—a stray hen, a thieving cat, a barking dog, envy of a neighbour's pretty daughter, jealousy of another's husband—was enough to cause a row, and their grievances were shouted down the street in torrents of words. Frenziedly, shamelessly, the women gave vent to their spleen. Occasionally it seemed to the youth that a shrill, long-drawn howl hung permanently in the air:

"Ow-w-w!"

Almost every Sunday evening and night a woman's wild cry would be heard, and several times Matvei had seen a white figure, half-naked and with flying hair, go dashing down the street. With a start he would remember how Pelageya had wound her torn-out hair round her finger.

But worst of all was the intimate talk of the men on the subject of women. All that he had heard the work-

men say, all that, against his will, he had gathered from the smutty remarks passed between his father and Pushkaryov or Vlasyevna, now flowed together to form a deep and dirty pool in which women, shamelessly naked and plastered all over with leech-like obscenities, were being drowned.

He felt stunned and strangled by the unspeakable coarseness of what men said about women. He sometimes fancied he saw a naked woman lying in the middle of the road and muddy boots trampling on her belly—a mother's belly—crushing out the unborn lives and the untold tales within it. He was sure that all women, Vlasyevna excepted, were as simple, affectionate and joyfully responsive to affection as Pelageya had been, and as compassionate as his mother. He thought of all women as mothers, as kind sisters, as young maidens awaiting their betrothed as flowers await the sun.

But now he began to experience the curiosity of someone who realized he was made of different stuff from them. Formerly he had blushed to hear of their lying minds that always truckled to their bodies. Now he listened silently and attentively. He bent his eyes upon the ground, and invariably a vision of a nude body rose before him.

At night he was aware that within his poisoned heart something good and pure was disintegrating, and that his body was being consumed by hot flames of lust, and he wept in his impotence, for it was a sad and bitter thing to realize that each new day, instead of adding something to enrich his soul, took something away from it, leaving it as desolate as the fields beyond the town.

He sensed cruelty on every hand. In the dull flow of daily life, it alone stood out in bright patches, irresistibly attracting his attention and making him recall more often and with greater sympathy his father's contemptuous remarks about the inhabitants of Okurov.

The life about which his father had told such vivid tales was not to be found here in the town, where the only Samson they knew was a hunchbacked, bald-headed, crooked-nosed fellow who made caps out of old trousers.

Often Matvei said to himself sadly: it would be better to go on guessing at things as I used to do than to know them as I do now.

At home, too, life was disagreeable. The weeder Natalya was now cook in place of Vlasyevna, and she had an unpleasant smell. The workmen quarrelled and fought one another and teased Shakir; they called him a sow's ear and asked him how many wives he kept at home and if it was true that all good Mohammedans were required to shave the hair off their bodies.

Tireless in inventing insults, they pelted the upright Tatar with the stinking refuse of foul words, in response to which he merely gazed at them with his slanting eyes, clicked his tongue and said softly but impressively:

"Ts, ts!—very, very bad. Everything you make fun of. You make fun of me, make fun of Mohammed, make fun of Allah. Nothing you don't make fun of. Ts, ts! Bad Russian waggle-waggle tongue."

His ears, protruding like the handles of a clay pot, turned red and his grey eyes grew misty.

The Okurov rains set in, crowding out the fresh air and draping the blue vistas in fog. Cold streams of water poured between the hills, cleaving ditches down the sides of the gullies. Mud puddles stretched across the streets, the windows of the houses wept, the trees turned black, the earth was choked with water, the town grew quiet, empty, chilled and swollen with rain. The daws, the crows, the sparrows, all living creatures sought shelter. Sounds grew sodden and blurred. The only definite thing was the plaintive weeping of the rain. At night it was as if some big, weary, invisible creatures were desperately pleading for help:

"Help! Help! Take pity!"

One dark night Matvei went out into the yard and heard a strange sound, like the gasping of a woman worn out with sobbing. It brought to mind the dreary songs Shakir sang as he worked, or as he rested on the bench beside the gate on Sundays.

"Is that you, Shakir?"

The sound broke off. Out of the darkness emerged the handsome form of the yard porter. He came up to his master, gave a shrug of despair and spoke as if a heavy hand were clutching his throat.

"Very hard, master. I'm afraid this hand won't obey me. It wants to smash their ugly mugs. Oh! *Ur-sigim annani!* I can stand it no more! You pay me, I go away."

He tossed his hat on his head and pulled it down hard with both hands, stamping on the ground and grinding his teeth.

"Gr-r-r!"

Matvei hung his head in shame, unable to find words with which to comfort this weeping man, who was twice his age.

"I can stand it no more," he heard the heavy, broken words. "I say nothing, I try to forget. I grit my teeth, I pray Mohammed, I do everything. You pay me, I go away."

Matvei's heart swelled up in the heat of his rage and red dots swam in front of his eyes.

"Wait, don't go away," he said firmly. "I'll give them a fright, just wait—" But at this point his voice broke like the voice of a young cock, and he shouted: "Go ahead and smash their filthy mugs for them!"

"You're good," said Shakir, smacking his lips. "Laugh at me—I don't care; laugh at God—I do care."

On entering the kitchen for supper, Matvei glanced at the sad drawn face of the Tatar and again felt the tide of anger rising in his breast.

"You—" he said to the workmen, and for the first time in his life he let out a stream of foul words, taking pleasure in it. All looked at him with bulging eyes and shrank back in their seats. This encouraged him.

After a little pause he said calmly and decisively:

"Anyone who dares make fun of Shakir again will get paid off."

No one said a word.

"Well, damn your souls, how do you like that?" said Pushkaryov at last.

The young master, unable to sit down to table with men he had just cursed so roundly, went out into the orchard. The trees had been stripped by the October winds and for a long time he walked up and down the leaf-strewn paths.

Cold weather had set in and the sky was wrapped in a thick blanket of clouds. Moist and impenetrable, they hid the moon and stars and extinguished the red flare of the autumn sunset. As the wind tore through the town it shook the trees, howled in the chimneys, shrieked a warning of coming storms, and ripped sounds to pieces, bringing to the ear a shard of a word, a shattered cry.

The convent bell tolled the hour in the breathless silence of the prostrate town, and each time the bell-rope was pulled a loose sheet of tin on the roof of the belfry gave two little rasping shrieks.

The tolling of the bell was meek and mournful, like the cry of a creature lost in the dark, worn out with crying and despairing of being heard. Dogs, waked by the bell, gave a few dispirited barks, then once more the town was plunged in a pool of silence.

On Sunday evenings Klucharev, fireman and chorister, would appear in the kitchen. He was a relative of Natalya's, as Pushkaryov had declared with a wry face.

Matvei loved to sit at the deal table in the kitchen with Klucharev and the Tatar at one end playing draughts

with a serious and intent air, and Pushkaryov at the other balancing his books and calculating the week's debits and credits on a big new abacus. Here, too, sat Natalya with her sewing. She had grown less flighty and the expression of her green eyes showed that she took her new responsibilities seriously. The wind sang in the chimney, beetles rustled behind the stove, the frost crackled in the yard, the beads clicked on the abacus, Shakir hummed a song, and Natalya laughed at him good-naturedly. It took Klucharev some time to get used to Matvei's presence. At first he would get up, sniffle and avert his heavy-lidded eyes every time he came in, growling in a deep bass voice:

"Good health to you."

The greeting would rebound from a far corner in a querulous echo.

Shakir would pat the bench beside him and say to his master:

"Here, sit down. Learn. You move, fireman. Where to? I'm here. *Absil*!"

And he would wink at Matvei and give him a little nudge.

Klucharev was no match for the Tatar. He sat long over each move with his elbows on the table, his fingers clutching his black curly hair, staring at the board with eyes of uncertain colour. Shakir, cheek in hand, droned in a low guttural voice:

"Amdi–kaidak–kilain?
"Kunum–nochuk–kogain?"

Klucharev raised his head and gazed at him a moment in silence before returning to the draughts-board.

"What's that you're singing, Shakir?" Natalya asked him.

"In Russian language it means: what am I to do? How am I to live?"

"Funny songs you Tatars sing," observed Natalya with a little sigh.

Matvei glanced at Klucharev and remembered with what dreadful serenity he had sung while following old Kozhemyakin's coffin to the graveyard and standing beside the grave. The chorister had an unforgettable face: an inverted triangle, the base of which was the man's big brown forehead, the height of which was measured by a long crooked nose. His cheeks were almost entirely covered by a stiff black beard and his thick moustache gave no glimpse of lips or teeth. Matvei had the impression that it was not of the game he thought as he pored over the draughts-board, and that this was why he always lost. Matvei imagined that this fierce-looking, black-bearded man had many interesting things to tell, and true enough, one day he began to speak.

"I had a dream last night," he said without taking his eyes off the board. "I dreamt I saw a peasant as tall as the sky with a scythe half a verst long in his hands, walking along, cutting down everything that came in his path: woods, villages, everything, without a sound."

"A bad omen," said Natalya calmly. "It means cholera."

"Cholera?" repeated Klucharev sceptically. "Hm. What if a great big man like that should come in real life and take the belfry by the steeple and start smashing houses and roofs and people's heads with it?"

"There you go, making things up again," said Pushkaryov with a disapproving shake of his head.

"Ha, ha, waggle-waggle tongue!" laughed Shakir, rocking to and fro.

Klucharev gazed at the soldier with wide and serious eyes.

"Dreams? Dreams aren't made up. Another time I dreamt I saw a fish something like a sheat-fish, only it had teeth. And it went flying about on wings, each wing a hundred feet long."

"Well?" prompted Matvei, seeing that the fireman had withdrawn into the darkness of his dreams.

"Well, it went flying about. That's all. And it threw a shadow on the earth. And when this shadow fell on a person, that was the end of him. Sometimes it turned into a horse, and if a lake happened to lie in its path, one splash with its hoof and the whole earth was flooded. . . ."

His words, sieved through the black tangle of his beard, seemed to become black and fuzzy too, like spiders.

"Was the fish white?" asked Natalya absently.

"Grey. Dust-colour."

"Perhaps that means rain," said Natalya. "White means snow. And a horse? Warm weather, perhaps."

"Pushkaryov," said Shakir, winking at Matvei, "what does the fireman see in his dream?"

"A fish. A sheat-fish."

The Tatar roared with laughter.

"So he tell us a fish story. Ha, ha! Waggle-waggle tongue! Russian, he likes a story. He feels bored, he makes up a story. He likes many words. Ha, ha! Fish story!"

Matvei found some truth in the Tatar's words.

One day the young master asked Klucharev where he came from and was surprised to learn that he had been born in the artisans' settlement.

"I thought you came from far away," he said in disappointment.

The chorister raised his triangular face.

"There's two families of us Klucharevs: Makar's and Grigory's. I belong to Makar's," he explained.

"Think so?" said Pushkaryov with a dubious little laugh. "That's not certain. More likely you have paymaster Perekopov to thank for being born into this world. In our settlement it's hard to tell who the children come from. That's because everybody's so poor."

"What of it?" said Klucharev calmly. "I'm speaking about how I'm put down in the church records. It says

I'm the son of Makar Klucharev, so that's what I must be. I'm no richer or poorer one way or the other." Turning to Matvei he went on: "I've been to distant places. Five years I rocked in a cavalry saddle. Got drunk in a hundred towns. Once we were quartered in Romny. Ukrainians there, and Poles. Couldn't understand a word. Then we were in Pinsk. Swamps all over the place. Dull as ditch-water. People don't know how to pick a place to live in. They squeeze into places where everybody else is. Funny. When I came out of the cavalry I joined the fire-brigade. For the sake of appearances, as if I was working."

The dark words crawled through the kitchen, casting a dreary spell over everyone. Even the beetles behind the stove grew quieter.

"When I was a boy I liked to put out fires. The other fellows would build camp-fires and I'd put them out. Throw sand on them."

"Why?" asked Matvei.

"Why not? It's light enough in the day-time without fires, and in the night-time it's meant to be dark."

"What Allah makes, no man must change," said Shakir, adding with a smile: "But when a herdsman watches horses on a cold dark night and a wolf howls, then he needs fire."

Sometimes Pushkaryov told them about his service in the army, using words Matvei had become familiar with, such as *Spießruten,* "shako," and "bite bullets." He often got into arguments with Klucharev and would shake his account book at him.

"A fine soldier, you!" he once shouted scornfully.

"What about yourself?" replied the fireman imperturbably. "I don't see that you've set the world on fire."

"It's not a matter of setting the world on fire, it's a matter of doing your job. Everybody ought to do his job. Every job goes to serve the state, goes to serve Russia. And what is Russia, have you ever thought of that? There's no end to her, this Russia of ours. Steppes, swamps,

deserts, do they have to be built up or not, you old fool? There's nothing Russia doesn't need; I know, I've tramped this land from end to end. There's work for two hundred years ahead. So roll up your sleeves and get down to it. When you've worked until there's plenty of everything for everybody, you can stop. That's Russia for you!"

"I'm happy as I am; I don't aim to set the world on fire."

"Oh, you don't, don't you?" shrieked Pushkaryov, writhing with fury. "You're happy as you are. Is that so? Think of that, now! A ship without a harbour, eh? Go wherever the wind blows? A worm, that's what you are!"

"A fireman, that's what I am."

"Because you're too lazy to be anything else. I can see through your tricks. We have a fire two, three, at most five times a year, and not much of a one at that. So you think to yourself: that's the job for me, in the fire-brigade, nothing to do but stand on the watch-tower and count the daws."

While they quarrelled the Tatar played draughts by himself, screwing up first one eye, then the other. Matvei sat listening to the words of the old soldier, watching the imperturbable face of the fireman and trying to decide which of them was right.

"Every man has got to do his job, that's the law. Work's the only thing that gives a person the right to live," shrieked Pushkaryov, rattling the beads on the abacus, banging the table with his fist, and scraping his boots on the floor.

"I don't give a tinker's damn for any of that," drawled Klucharev through his beard. "All I care about is not being bothered. Every job comes to the same end: you die if you work, you die if you shirk."

Matvei recalled the favourite song of the jolly little doctor:

The priest will die
And the soldier will die,
He alone will not die
Whom death passes by.

The youth felt the shaggy paws of depression stealing over him; he longed to go to bed and sleep for a week, a month, a year.

Wailing winds played over the fields, covering the hills with their white wings and burying the town in great drifts of snow. Hungry wolves howled at night and were barked at by the timorous dogs of Okurov. The sky was rarely free of leaden clouds, but glorious were those nights when the firmament was a deep and quivering blue, pierced to its depths by the golden rays of stars. The snow crystals twinkled with joy, as if the earth, waiting under its soft coverlet for spring's renascense, were sprinkled with star-dust. Humbly the trees bowed their snow-laden branches, every twig decked in lacy hoarfrost and spangled with diamonds and emeralds. The golden crosses of the churches were turned to silver, the bird-houses wore peaked white caps, snow lay in thick manes on the ridges of the roofs and hung in layers over the edges, where the wind carved it into fanciful patterns. The frosty air was a sensitive conductor of sound: the solemn cawing of the crows, the gay twittering of the tomtits, the comical peeping of the bullfinches, was carried from one end of the town to the other. But silence froze on the encircling hills. Okurov lay, as it were, on a silver platter carved by the frost and engraved by the wind.

On the ice of the Putanitsa River began the yearly fisticuffs. Every Sunday after the midday meal boys in their teens would come running from the artisans' settlement, which lay buried up to the roofs in snow. Having crossed the river, they would shout from the bottom of the hill:

"Come out and fight!"

Some wore their mothers' or sisters' jackets, others were wrapped in shawls, many were wearing their fathers' rough boots, those without caps had their heads tied up in kerchiefs, most of them were without gloves or mittens. On the hill they were met by a hostile clan of townsmen in good warm clothes. The town boys laughed at the ragamuffins from the settlement.

"Crawl out from under your mothers' petticoats, you beetles!" they cried. "Climb up, ladies! We'll make a hash of those mugs of yours!"

The settlement boys took the fight seriously. They climbed up the icy hill-side in close formation, holding on to protuberances in the frozen ground with their bare hands.

"Don't break ranks, fellows!" they shouted to one another. "Don't run ahead! Hold yourselves in!"

On this day the town boys tried to stem the attack by throwing their enemies back down the hill, but this was dangerous: the settlement boys caught their booted legs and, if they were unable to hold their ground, the two went rolling down together. Gradually the town boys retreated, admitting the invaders to Porechnaya Street, where a jolly fight began.

"At 'em, fellows, at 'em!" shouted the settlement boys, advancing in a solid wall. "Give it to the swells!"

They were leaner, quicker and more courageous than the town boys. Having taken more drubbings from their parents, they were used to being hurt and had learned to bear pain.

The town boys, like their fathers, employed cunning in their battles. They sent five or six of their bravest warriors out in front of their line, and when the settlement youths drew out their ranks into a wedge, the townsmen hurled themselves on their flanks. But the settlement boys learned this trick and countered it by beating a hasty retreat, catching the town boys in a semicircle and driving them

back to the market-place, where they knocked them down with their bare fists.

A crowd of bigger boys had already gathered at the market-place, awaiting their turn to join in the fray; the two hostile lines drew up again and hurled oaths and taunts at each other.

"Had enough?" cried the settlement lads, proud of their victory.

The town boys replied by chanting together raucously:

The bare-bellied settlement swine
Sell their girls for a bottle of wine.

To which the settlement boys retorted:

The gents who live in the town
Stew their own mothers and guzzle them down.

Youthful voices rang out in the frost air. Ugly epithets were tossed back and forth:

"Beggars!"

"Swillers!"

"Thieves!"

"Thieves yourselves!"

The battle of words gave the fighters a brief respite and at the same time inflamed their anger.At last they threw themselves upon each other again, grunting and wheezing, smashing noses, tearing lips. Grown-ups were watching them now, and each boy was anxious to make a show of his strength, agility and daring.

Under the shelter of the stalls stood the onlookers, many of whom, such as Tolokonnikov, the two Maklakovs, locksmith Koptyev and the fat fireman Sevachev, were famous fighters.

All of them had warm mittens on their hands and wore coats suitable for fighting: short sheepskins of thin hides held in tightly with bright-coloured girdles. The elder Maklakov's mittens were of fine green leather.

From time to time a youth would run out of the line with a broken nose or split lip. He would go up to the onlookers, spitting in the snow and exercising all his will-power to keep back tears of pain, hate and injury.

His uncle, father or elder brother would chaff him:

"Well, you dunce, so you got your mug smashed again?"

"Go ahead and cry, you baby! Just look how he's screwed up his snout!"

If the boy burst into tears, a relative would shake him by the hair or ear and say:

"No bawling, mind! Once you're in the fight, no bawling, you puppy!"

Older boys from the settlement, too, put in an appearance. "Hey, you!" they would shout at the town boys from where they were standing behind their own line of fighters. "Come on! Let's see what you're made of!"

"No funking, now!"

Breaking out of his line, Mishka Klucharev, the nephew of the fireman, stepped forward. He was a lean, well-built lad of sixteen.

"Get back!" he shouted at the town boys, scattering them with a wave of his hand as if they were sparrows. They retreated respectfully and some of them ran over to the grown-ups, announcing in alarm:

"Mishka Klucharev's stepped out! I say there he is, see him?"

Mishka shouldered off his rags, snatched off his cap, tossed it behind him and shouted a challenge:

"Come on, you dandies! Who wants to fight me? Come on, you hen-herds!"

His hair bristled on his bullet-head, his nose was short and curved like an owl's beak, his thin lips were drawn down disdainfully. He stood with his legs wide apart, hands on hips, facing the enemy, staring at them with pale eyes that had an ugly glint in them.

The town boys held a long consultation. They were expected to send a boy of Mishka's age against him, but all the boys of his age, knowing his prowess, were afraid to accept the challenge.

At last stocky, broad-faced Bazunov stepped out. The settlement boys laughed and whistled. In the spring Bazunov would be nineteen years old.

"Look at the old man they've sent out!"

"Pull yourself together, grandad!"

Bazunov was ashamed. He turned back and called out plaintively:

"You go, Vasya! Or you, Kulugurov!"

"After you," replied Kulugurov, adding frankly: "I tried it once; I'm no match for him."

"Willing to take me on?" Bazunov asked Mishka without looking at him.

"I'd take on your father," bragged Mishka. "Hey, fellows," he called back to his line, "tell my old man I sent him my love before I died!"

Bazunov frowned and struck a fighting attitude, his left fist advanced, his right elbow crooked.

The snow crunched under his heavy tread, a tense silence reigned, both lines pressed in a ring round the combatants:

"Widen the circle!" somebody cried. "Give them more room!"

Mishka kept a sharp eye on his opponent. From time to time his right arm would shoot up, Bazunov would duck, and Mishka would pretend he had raised his arm to scratch his head.

"Don't be afraid," he teased, "I won't kill you—I'll just shove your nose into your ear, that's all! Go on swinging your arms like that, as if you were kneading dough or catching flies and I'll take a rest till I feel chilly. What a fist you've got! Must weigh a ton! Your poor wife!"

"Poor *you*!" growled Bazunov.

The town boy sent a blow home; Mishka ducked and gave him a clip on the chin from below.

"How're you feeling?" he said.

Infuriated, Bazunov hurled himself at him, swinging madly, while the agile settlement lad, evading his blows, battered him in the left side.

"Don't lose your head, Bazunov! What's the matter with you, have you gone mad? Stand still!" cried the townsfolk.

"Hear that? Don't lose your head!" added the settlement boy, bouncing round him like a rubber ball until, stooping down suddenly, he knocked him off his feet by lamming him in the chest with his head and in the belly with his fist. The settlement spectators let out shrieks and whistles of delight; the townsfolk, chagrined, praised the victor grudgingly:

"He's a quick brute."

"He certainly is!"

"Slippery."

"Bazunov's a baby next to him."

Bazunov sat panting on the ground.

"Call that fighting?" he grumbled. "He buzzes round you like a mosquito."

"Come on, Kulugurov! You're next!" cried the victor proudly.

"I don't like fighting alone."

"Oh, you don't, don't you?"

"I like fighting in the line."

"Or lying on the mat beside the stove?"

The settlement boys sang out at the top of their lungs:

"On the mat, on the mat, sat a big fat cat! The mistress brought the shears, and snipped off its ears!"

There was a little stir among the townsfolk and a murmur of voices.

"Watch out, fellows!" cried out Klucharev to the settlement boys. "Come here, Fedya! And you, Grisha and Foma! Stand next to me!"

Suddenly, with a flourish of fists, he and his friend rushed on the town boys.

"At 'em, fellows!" he cried. "Don't be afraid! Knock the gizzards out of them!"

Fists flew, bodies fell, teeth crunched, blows rained down on chests, boys kept running out of the fray to spit blood out of their mouths or blow it out of their noses.

"Don't let them scare you, boys!" shouted Kulugurov.

"Hold on!" came Mishka's ringing voice.

The contest was at its height, pairs of fighters clinched and pounded each other with all their might, each determined to get the upper hand.

"Smash the sugar-plum boys!" cried the artisans' sons.

"Hold on! Don't run away!" shouted Kulugurov and Bazunov, but the town boys were retreating, unable to withstand the swift and united attack of their opponents.

And so it had been as long as people could remember: the settlement boys always won the battle in the marketplace and drove the town boys on until they reached the churchyard.

On seeing their sons being worsted, the townsmen turned angrily to their grown-up champions and said:

"What are you standing about for? Can't you see they're licking our boys? Look what's happening! Time you stepped in!"

And so Koptyev, Tolokonnikov and the Maklakov brothers rushed among the settlement boys and struck out at them for all they were worth, strewing them on the ground like ninepins.

"Ha, ha! Now we'll show them!" laughed the onlookers happily, cheering their side on, jumping up and down in glee and kicking the boys who had been knocked down.

"Don't kick a man when he's down, you brutes!" cried the victims as they crawled off to the side, where they waited—their arms over their faces to protect themselves from the kicks of the townsmen—for a chance to make a dash for the river.

Matvei Kozhemyakin was infected by the excitement of his fellow-townsmen, he hailed their victory and ran laughing after the fighters. But when he saw the men kicking the boys on the ground he stopped and walked away. He felt like shouting "That's not fair!", but he lacked the courage and knew that in any case nobody would hear him.

Mishka Klucharev darted like a snake in and out of the flying legs; Fedya Ordyntsev, son of the most famous fighter in the settlement, rolled like a barrel over the ground, gasping with rage and rubbing snow on his bleeding face.

The settlement boys were in a panic; they broke ranks and rushed away as if scattered by the wind.

"Hurrah!" roared the victors on top of the embankment, and from the ice down below came the cry of the men from the settlement:

"Hold on, lads! We're coming!"

The winter day was short; by this time blue shadows were gathering over the river, cutting off sight of the settlement; the birds, frightened by the ringing of the church bell, flew out of their nests in the belfry; the cold grew more intense.

Unhurriedly the men from the settlement moved over the ice. The townsmen noted who was among them as they stood waiting for them at the edge of the embankment.

"There's Streltsov, the old devil!"

"Do you see Kvashnin?"

"There he is, over on that side."

"Damned if Macedon isn't with them!"

"It's Ordyntsev walking at their head."

"They all seem to have turned out this time."

"Hey, you gents!" called out the cobbler Macedon, who was never known to be sober. "Come on down! We're itching to have a swing at you!"

The townsmen tightened their belts and climbed down on to the ice.

"You stand in the centre, Koptyev, with one of the Maklakovs on either side," they decided as they went.

"Put Sevachev, Yermil, Tolokonnikov and a few other of the strongest on the left flank, and let them swoop down on the swine as soon as they start to scatter."

"Feeling queasy? Take it easy!" called out the settlement men as they lined up.

They were a rough and ragged lot; many of them had already had too much to drink and all of them—drunk and sober alike—were reckless with their tongues. They mocked the townsfolk with gusto and great skill, and there was something wolfish, desperate and intimidating in each one of them.

Tipsy Macedon came staggering at their head, bawling at the top of his lungs:

Okurov fighters keep hens
And wrestle all day with their friends,
They keep in trim
(And none too slim)
By stealing the hens of their friends.

Another jaunty voice broke out:

Their women's phizzes stare and gape,
Fists have punched them out of shape.

"Hey!" shouted Tolokonnikov grimly. "Which of you rogues wants to test his strength against mine?"

"Against yours? Isn't that nice now? My fist's just aching to kiss your mug!"

"Then come on!"

"What's your hurry?"

"Afraid?"

"B-r-r! My legs keep jumping up behind my ears!"

"I'll flatten your ears for you!"

"Good! Then I won't hear any more of your silly remarks!"

"Well, here goes, fellows!" cried the locksmith Koptyev, pulling his hat down over his ears with both hands. "All together! Let's give the thieves a thrashing they won't forget!" and he let out a fierce yell that excited him as well as his companions.

"Let them have it! Come on, fellows! Smash them! Smash the guts out of them!"

The townsmen rolled in a mighty wave against the line of artisans; fists thumped, teeth were gnashed, deafening howls and roars were heard.

"Wow! Gr!"

"Stick together!" thundered the frenzied Ordyntsev, swinging his arm like a hatchet at the heads of the townsmen. Against him stood Koptyev, who had taken off his sheepskin and was fighting in a torn blouse. They had long been close friends.

"Here's to you, Koptyev!" Ordyntsev greeted him, delivering a blow on his friend's head.

"Take your change, Ordyntsev!" replied Koptyev as his fist came down on Ordyntsev's chest.

The cobbler Macedon, his cap in his teeth, was pummelling Maklakov on the ears. The ungainly Maklakov stood wagging his head and waiting, then he brought his two fists down on the cobbler's head as if nailing him into the ice.

"Take that!"

Swinging his arms up again, he aimed at Ordyntsev, but the tall saddler Kvashnin struck him under the arm with one fist and in the teeth with the other. The townsman sank.

"Oh no you don't!" shouted Kvashnin, "Get up! I've got another waiting for you! Remember that breech-band you never paid me for? Well, here's for the breech-band!"

"Less talk!" rasped Streltsov, the old bear, who was calmly and methodically smashing the faces of the townsmen with an enormous fist. "Give it to them! You can settle accounts on a weekday."

The townsmen were driven back to the river-bank. It looked as if they would be pressed up against the embankment and pounded to pulp by dozens of iron fists.

The air was filled with the sound of blows, grunts, moans and wild yells. The men spat and uttered searing curses.

With growing fury the settlement men attacked the centre of the townsmen's line, determined to break through. They threw down man after man, as if beyond them stood their real and most dreaded enemy.

But at this point Fedya Ordyntsev called the alarm:

"Look, Dad! They're coming up from behind!"

"Back, fellows! Turn back!" shouted Mishka Klucharev.

Too late. The townsmen, led by Sevachev the fireman and a few of their best fighters, had already fallen on the settlement men from behind. The fireman was a small man with short arms and a head that seemed to grow straight out of his shoulders. Lifting his arms to the level of his shoulders, he battered his opponents in belly and chest with incredible speed, pushing them back, knocking them down, cleaving their ranks in two. They gasped, twisted, doubled up and fell at his feet like hewn logs.

"Wow-ow!" he shrieked.

The settlement fighter Streltsov knocked him down by ramming him with lowered head, but Streltsov himself was felled by a blow on the head from Tolokonnikov.

"Smash 'em!" shouted the town boys.

"Fall back!" shouted the settlement boys, seeing that

their fathers, uncles and brothers were being defeated and were lying scattered over the river ice.

By this time feelings had reached such a pitch that the grown-ups could no longer play fair. Against each of the strong men of the settlement stood five or six townsmen. The contest was over and a free-for-all had begun. The men recalled past insults and injuries, quarrels and jealousies, all the grudges they had been harbouring in their hearts. This made them vicious and they fought with the fury of wild animals.

"Fall back!" shouted the scattered settlement men in a futile effort to unite their forces. But their ranks were broken up into little groups which the townsmen chased down the narrow streets of the settlement, out into the fields, and into the snow-drifts.

As the victors streamed through the streets of the settlement they bawled obscene songs about artisans' wives and daughters, spat at the window-panes, threw open the gates of the yards and insulted every woman they met.

Matvei admitted sadly that all the colourfulness and beauty he had found in the contest—the strength, agility, contempt for pain, the well-aimed blows, the witty remarks, the high-pitched fun—all this had vanished, and from every side, in a murky stream, flowed the dark animosity of two classes of people who had no understanding of each other; the same incomprehensible animosity that stood between peasants and townsfolk on market day.

It often happened that one side or the other, having become suspicious of a particular fighter in the enemy's line, would pull him out and search him, and on finding a lead weight or a pair of bronze coins in his fist or up his sleeve, would mercilessly beat him for violating the rules of the fight.

When the two lines had clashed for the last time and Matvei had heard the roars and howls of the final desper-

ate effort, he realized with a sinking heart that he had nothing in common with these people.

Now and again, depressed by his loneliness, he envied them, and the sound of their wild cries filled him with a longing to throw himself into the fray and strike out mercilessly until his strength gave out.

And the moment came when he was forced to fight: on the way home he was overtaken by some of the weary town combatants. He saw them spitting red in the snow, feeling their loosened teeth, and patting the swellings under their eyes. He heard them trying to cough up the pain in their chests and grunting as they tested their ribs.

On Porechnaya Street three young men caught him up.

"Now who do you suppose this is?" drawled one of them.

"Kozhemyakin," said another.

"Kozh-e-mya-kin? Who's Kozh-e-mya-kin?"

"Savely's son," sniggered the third.

"Savely? Who's Savely?"

"Let me go!" cried Matvei heatedly, seeing that it was Maklakov, Khryapov and Kulugurov who were accosting him.

"Son of Savely or son of a bitch?" scoffed Khryapov.

Matvei had always despised this youth for the cruel pranks he played. Now he was enraged by his taunts. He swung back his leg and kicked him in the belly with all his might. Seeing that the fellow sank down with a gasp, Matvei went on his way without a word. But Kulugurov and Maklakov threw themselves on him from behind, knocked him down with a blow on the ear, and began to kick him where he lay.

"So you kick, do you? And in the belly?" they cried.

Matvei got so entangled in his coat that he could not get up, and they went on kicking him, aiming at his face. He came home torn, scratched and bloody, with two black

eyes, and as he was washing himself in the kitchen he heard Natalya wail:

"Good heavens! What have they done to you? Who was it?"

Since Matvei ignored her question, Pushkaryov answered for him:

"Our fellows, of course, from the settlement. He's a townsman, so naturally enough they went for him. Well, this was your first fight, lad, and a good thing! How I loved a fight when I was your age!"

Matvei stopped going down to the river and avoided the central square, knowing that if he should meet Khryapov and his companions he would certainly get into another fight. Occasionally, before going to bed, he would kneel with bowed head, his arms at his sides (the attitude Pelageya had assumed as she had knelt before his father on that memorable day) and murmur all the prayers and psalms he knew by heart. The icon-lamp would wink in response as it lighted the sorrowful face of the Virgin. The effort of praying exhausted him and brought him peace.

A new singer, tall and slim as a birch-tree, appeared in the convent choir. The mildness of her glance reminded him of Pelageya's, and when, one day, her eyes came to rest on his face, he felt himself completely enthralled. Her mouth, small and bright, also reminded him of Pelageya's, and when she sang "Lord, be merciful . . ." in a high clear voice, he felt it was for him that she was begging mercy, and he remembered his mother, whose compassion for her fellow-men had led her to go off into the woods to pray for them, and perhaps even die for them, worn out with praying.

In her black habit and head-dress, the singer was like a little bell-tower whose silvery chiming called people to a life of peace and quiet and love. As she stood there in the choir-loft she seemed suspended in air, her figure set

off by the twinkling of little lights and the diaphanous smoke of the incense. The stern countenances of the icons, set in silver and lighted by soft lamps, were turned to her with the same unwavering attention as was Matvei's.

He was aware that, on discovering his glance fixed upon her, she straightened her slender body as if striving to rise higher, and her voice became stronger and sweeter, as if she were eager to encourage a hope as fragile as a snowdrop.

Her pale face and her body, clad in those impenetrable black robes, evoked strange fancies: Matvei imagined that one day she would cast off her dark garments and appear before men pure and lovely, like the white swan in the fairy-tale, and would stretch out strong arms and say in the voice of Vasilisa the Wise:

"I am the Mother of Creation!"

Then all people would be filled with a great shame and would shed tears of remorse and, bowing down before her wisdom and beauty, would begin a new life inspired by love.

He did not ask anyone who the new singer was or where she came from for fear he might hear something he preferred not to know. And when the convent portress, kind old Taisia, asked him with a gentle smile, "Have you heard our new singer?" he hurried away with a little bow, murmuring, "Yes, a pretty voice. Good-day."

And then the singer disappeared. She was not present at the Saturday evening service, nor at Sunday matins or vespers.

Perhaps she has fallen ill, he thought in agony.

But on the evening of Lady Day he heard Natalya, who knew all the gossip of the town, recounting the following story with great solemnity:

"They're rich, those Chernozubovs, the richest people in the *uyezd*. Their boats and rafts sail up and down the Volga. Lumber's their trade. And they have their own sawmill. So as I was saying, as soon as her future father-in-

law sees his younger son is sweet on her too (on Katerina, that is) he puts her in our convent. Then the older son comes home (a one-eyed fellow—went owl-hunting when a boy and got his eye pecked out). 'Where's Katerina?' says he. And the old devil tells him his younger son's been making love to her. 'Yegor?' says Levon (that's the elder's name, Levon). 'Yegor,' says the old man. So Levon goes to the sawmill where Yegor's working and picks up an iron bar and goes after his brother, and hits him straight on the temple and the boy falls down stone-dead. Then come the police and different clerks and the like. And now they've taken that Katerina away under guard to be cross-examined."

"Is it the new choir-singer you're talking about?" asked Matvei faintly.

"It is. And there are bad rumours abroad, saying she'd had an affair with the old man, her future father-in-law, before that. Who knows? She's an orphan; anything can happen to an orphan."

Matvei stood in the doorway holding on to the door-posts with outstretched arms as if crucified.

"That's a lie—a lie—" he murmured.

Natalya began a vehement defence of the truth of her statements, but he walked away. He went to his own room and stood looking out of the window. It seemed to him that poisonous vapours were rising all around him, that autumn had come back and a dense fog hung in the air, blotting out the bright square of the window and the lustre of the spring evening.

On the first day of Easter Week he went to the graveyard to kiss the crosses on the graves of Pelageya and his father. He was filled with quiet joy to see that the saplings he had planted had taken root. The slender wands of the birches were thickly studded with buds, and from the tips of the pine boughs sprang little yellow candles bedecked with drops of resin that glistened like gold in the

sun. Snowdrops peered shyly up at the sky from the grass on the graves, silken stars of primroses nodded in the breeze, and dandelion buds were bursting into golden aureoles.

People were strolling silently among the graves. From a distance Matvei spied the shaggy head of Klucharev. The chorister was sitting bare-headed on a grave, pushing the stem of a flower back and forth with a little twig as if making it bow to the sun and the earth. The two men kissed according to the Easter custom and Klucharev mumbled something about it being an early spring.

"Who of your kindred lies buried here?" asked Matvei, nodding at the grave.

Klucharev kicked the ground before answering.

"Nobody," he said; then, with a glance over his shoulder, "let's go. It's damp here."

The crosses cast pale shadows that deepened the green of the grass where they fell.

"Lonely?" asked the singer, looking at Matvei out of the corner of his eye.

"No-o," said Matvei after a little pause.

"Shakir was right when he said we were a lonely folk, we Russians," went on the singer. "And it's our loneliness that makes us weave fancies. Especially in these parts."

"But Shakir comes from these parts himself."

Klucharev pulled his cap down over his nose.

"Him and Pushkaryov are different. For one thing, they have faith in God."

Matvei looked up in surprise.

"Why, haven't you?"

"I'm not speaking about myself; I'm speaking in general," drawled the chorister.

"What do you mean, in general?" demanded Matvei.

"Nothing special," said Klucharev with a yawn. But when he had cast a look about him, he said in a mysterious, plaintive tone: "I don't know exactly how to put it,

but look: there's God, Jesus Christ; and then there's fate. If there's God, there can't be fate. Nothing, just God. God everywhere, and everything coming from Him. But we've got God and fate and Satan, and devils and hobgoblins and water-sprites, and there are elves in the woods, too. And will-o'-the-wisps in the bogs. And folk believe in the whole lot of them. There's no making head nor tail of it: what comes from God, and what from fate. Our priest, now, he believes in hobgoblins as sure as I'm standing here. And in fate, too. 'That's your fate, Yakim! Can't be helped,' he keeps telling me. 'How can it be my fate if there's God?' I once asked him. He just laughed. 'Fate, that's just a word,' he says." Klucharev swung up his arm and said in a threatening voice: "Just a word? I know those words of yours! Oh, no, it's not just a word!"

Matvei thought of the resignation with which people spoke of fate, and of the innumerable sayings attributing things to fate. He was in no mood to listen to a disquisition on the subject now, so he took leave of the chorister.

A few days later Klucharev asked him in a flat, casual way, "Do you go with the girls?"

"No," said Matvei, blushing.

"Why not?"

"There's no one to go with," replied Matvei uneasily after a moment's consideration.

"Oh," said Klucharev in a tone indicating that he found this explanation of the young man's continence quite convincing, and he immediately made him an offer. "Come with me," he said. "Don't be afraid, I'll take care of you. We'll go tomorrow; today's Saturday, it'd be a sin today, but tomorrow. . . ."

Matvei looked at the man's impassive face and thought to himself: "Should I go? Led like a bull to the slaughter? Yesterday it was fate he talked about, today it's this, tomorrow it'll be his dreams. . . ."

He found it offensive to think of these things, but not shameful. It was becoming harder and harder for him to live in chastity, and whenever he saw Natalya he thought of her as she had been on that unhappy night when Pelageya had sent her to his room.

Gradually the memory of Pelageya lost its power to keep him from thinking of other women, and often his thoughts caused him torture.

On the evening of the following day he was sitting in a tiny room in one of the settlement huts, making a futile attempt to hide his agitation. A samovar was standing on the table in front of him; it seemed to shrink and expand in turn as it steamed away, "S-s-s-s-s!", screwing up its shiny yellow face in a maudlin grimace. The floor boards creaked and the goatskin slippers of a young girl squeaked as she darted about the room so swiftly that Matvei could only make out a dark plait, white shoulders and pink skirts.

"Here, have a drink," Klucharev kept urging him in a husky voice. "You've got to drink in a place like this."

The man himself was drunk already and had a buxom woman on his knee.

"Dunyasha!" he shouted. "Make him drink!"

"He won't drink for nothing."

"Make him!"

All of a sudden the chorister was gone, as if Dunyasha had swept him out of the room with her voluminous skirts.

"May I put my arms round you?" she asked Matvei, sitting down next to him.

"Ye-es," he stammered, averting his eyes.

She put her arms round him and gazed into his face with vacuous eyes.

"What makes you so solemn?" she asked in surprise.

Matvei edged closer.

"It's ... it's not so easy," he said distractedly.

"I've never seen you before."

She gave an airy laugh.

"I've never seen you, either."

After that first night Klucharev, with sublime detachment, went on leading Matvei through all the dark labyrinths of Okurov's lower depths. And he took money for it, holding the coins up to the light or flipping them in his palm before putting them into his pocket.

He did not beg or demand money, he merely took it as his due, but he did it so often that Matvei said to him on several occasions:

"Aren't you taking rather a lot? Pushkaryov is grumbling...."

"A fig for him! Who cares?" Klucharev replied, and went on buying presents for the girls and treating them to nuts, cakes and liqueurs.

Who cares? was the hollow echo that sounded in Matvei's heart, and he followed the chorister wherever he went, as if led on a chain.

Matvei noticed a change coming over Klucharev: he grew less loquacious and drank without getting drunk; his face lengthened, his eyes dulled, he walked slower, dragging his feet and stumbling, and he seemed to find difficulty in drawing his shadow after him, so thick and heavy had it become.

Natalya was sullen in his presence. Whenever Shakir caught sight of Klucharev's thick black beard he would draw his lips into a thin line and walk away. Pushkaryov was given to railing at him.

"Here again, you low sot?" he would say.

"Aren't you feeling well?" Matvei once asked him, sensing that something was wrong.

The chorister gazed with heavy eyes into the distance a moment, then barked out the word so common to Okurov:

"I'm bored!"

The youth thought of his father, who discharged the round heavy word in a way that made the very earth quake with his resentment.

One day, while taking a walk with Matvei in the fields beyond the convent, Klucharev's spirits revived sufficiently for him to tell the youth another one of his gloomy dreams:

"And would you believe it, there was the sea in front of me!" he said with starting eyes, flinging out both arms. "The ocean! In one spot there was a mountain reaching up to the clouds, and there was me, crouching half-way up the mountain with a gun in my hands as if I was out hunting. All of a sudden a creature without a face and dressed in rags comes up to me and cries out: 'This mountain is my sins and Satan's throne.' And he puts his shoulder to the mountain and pushes it over, and me with it."

"Is that when you woke up?"

Klucharev did not answer. Shielding his eyes with his hand, he strained forward to scan the distant hills.

Early in the morning of the following day cries went echoing through the town that someone had shot himself in the garden behind police headquarters.

Klucharev had put an end to his dreams under a twisted old willow behind the shed of the fire-station. He had bent down a thick branch, fastened a string to it, tied his gun to it, stretched a string from the trigger to his finger and shot himself in the mouth, blowing off the top of his head. Bits of bone covered with black hair were strewn round his long, lean body, clots of blood stuck to the shed like overripe berries, and grey gobbets of brain clung to the mossy boards.

The strict Okurov police made a great fuss. They had hunchbacked Samson collect the bone fragments. The old man was so drunk he could not stand on his feet, so he crawled about on all fours with his hump pointing up at

the sky, putting the pieces in a bast basket, shaking his hand in the air after putting in each piece as if it had burnt his fingers.

"Who is it?" the townsfolk asked one another in frightened voices.

"Lord Almighty! It's the fireman!"

"The one that sang at St. Nikola's."

"Everybody knew him."

"Blew his head off!"

"Those artisans, they're always up to something!" said men in the market-place.

"Why, was he an artisan?"

"Oh, a fireman—it's all the same."

"No, it isn't. An artisan wouldn't have done it on a Sunday. An artisan would have chosen a Tuesday."

"True enough. He'd still be drunk on Monday."

"And then the artisans usually hang themselves."

The majority said nothing, but just stood staring at the blood- and brain-spattered earth, the broad back of the suicide and the faces of those who were talking. Some of them seemed to be making a supreme effort to remember the lineaments of death and the remarks its presence called forth.

"Where'll they bury him?" someone asked in an awe-struck voice.

"Where do they usually bury the likes of him? That's where he'll be buried."

"I meant—because after all, he sang in the choir."

"That won't help him."

"He's the seventeenth that's come to such an end in my lifetime," observed shrivelled old Khryapov, and he counted off on his fingers all the drunkards he remembered who had drowned, frozen to death, hung themselves, shot themselves, or just died of drink.

Bazunov, shaking back the curly grey locks of his bared head, intoned in a loud voice, as if reading the psalter:

"When a man has not the fear of God in his heart, he is no man, but is as the beasts of the field, who bring no profit to the earth."

It was August, and many of the leaves of the willow had turned yellow. Two of them, long and pointed, lay on Klucharev's back. The sun had long since risen above the town, but in this damp corner of the garden the earth was wet with dew and darkened by the shadow of the shed.

"Come, let's go home," said Pushkaryov, giving Matvei a nudge.

They went. The earth seemed to rock under their feet, the varicoloured houses leaped and danced, grimaces of fear, consternation, and feigned resignation flashed in the windows. Shakir's voice broke the silence of this bright morning.

"Why the Russian do this bad thing?" he asked reproachfully.

"As if you could understand!" growled Pushkaryov.

"I understand. I'm sorry. Why did he think of so many words? So many frightening words. Ts, Ts! Very bad. He was afraid, made others afraid."

"Hold your tongue!"

"Why?" insisted the Tatar gently. "The Russian was bored because he thought of words. Didn't work enough. He specially thought of hard things. He didn't like work."

"Shut up, you beetle!"

For a week or so Matvei kept to the house. He felt stunned, as if the shot had been fired inside his breast, stirring up all that was vague and troubling, all that had been stifled by his indifference, the indifference of one who had surrendered to life without giving battle. His impressions formed themselves automatically, by force of their own weight and against his will, into a thick glutinous mass that filled him with a sad sense of helplessness and quickly extinguished the spark of any protest, any thought

that might hinder his being gradually sucked down into a life terrible in its monotony and in the poverty of its dreams and purposes—the dingy, deplorable life of Okurov.

To avoid being inextricably caught in the meshes of Okurov, to burst the bonds of a boredom that at first chafed, rousing the beast in a man, and then, by gradually killing his soul, reduced him to a state of bovine indifference, one had to keep one's spiritual resources in a state of constant tension and possess an unwavering faith in the power of reason. But such faith could come only to those who had communion with a higher life, to those for whom the undying fires of all the hopes and aspirations ever lighted upon the earth were as clearly visible as the stars in the sky.

Those fires were not visible in Okurov.

The winter was long and boring. In the spring Matvei suffered a new bereavement. One day Natalya came running to him.

"Come, Matvei Savelyevich!" she cried. "There's something the matter with Pushkaryov."

The old soldier was sitting on a big coil of rope in the doorway of the barn leaning against the post and spitting blood.

"M-m," he murmured. "Looks as if I'm done for, Matvei. Strained myself—I shouldn't have, I daresay—something in my lungs—"

"You shouldn't have lifted that weight," commented one of the workmen standing behind him.

"Go away!" muttered the old soldier faintly, wiping the blood off his lips with his hand. "Look—still spurting. . . ."

He tried to get up, swayed, and almost fell.

"A fine thing!" he muttered with a guilty shake of his head. "I had a drink a year ago and here's the hang-over."

On lifting him up they saw that the coil of rope was drenched in blood and so were his clothes. They took him into the kitchen, where he crossed himself in front of the icon and stretched out on a bench.

"Go away," he said to the workmen. "Bring me some ice, cook. I'll suck it." Natalya went out, and when he was left alone with Matvei he said to him gravely, his eyes fixed on the dark opening of the stove: "This is the end. Hang on to that Tatar, Matvei; he knows everything, does Shakir. Remember what I told you: when it comes to animals, dogs are the best; when it comes to people, Tatars. Look after him; raise his pay. If only you weren't so young! I thought I was good for another five years, but I was wrong. This is the end."

He drew his eyebrows together and blinked his eyes. Blood dripped on the floor. Natalya brought him the ice, then stood sniffling in the doorway.

"What are you standing there for? Go away."

When she had gone he said in a matter-of-fact tone: "Be good to her, she's not a bad sort. Shakir's taken her in hand. Watch your step with women. You can take your pleasure, but a woman's to be respected. If you want a wife, look for one in our settlement; they may be poor and half-starved, but they've got more brains than the town women, and that's the truth."

He closed his eyes wearily. His face became lined and dark, as if charred by invisible fires. His hooked fingers stirred on Matvei's knee and the movement sent little shivers up the young man's spine.

"There's a noise inside my head as if it was swarming with black beetles," said Pushkaryov. "Don't be in a hurry to get married; fate'll come of itself, and no escaping it . . ."

Matvei longed to comfort him, but he found it shameful to lie at such a moment. And so he remained painfully silent.

"When I'm dead," went on the old soldier in a faint and wheezy voice, "call the barber and let him shave me. Don't hold a funeral feast, I know you can't stomach beggars, the lousy leeches. I've got two nephews: Savateika and Zosima. You might give them a little something some time."

"I will," said Matvei with difficulty.

"Not too much, they'll suck you dry. Put me in my uniform, with all the trappings. Stop crying."

"Sorry—" gulped Matvei.

"I know," said Pushkaryov without opening his eyes. "I'm sorry too, sorry to die. Don't forget about the uniform . . . and make me look nice. Perhaps I'll be meeting His Majesty Tsar Nikolai. . . ." In a sudden burst of strength he added distinctly: "Seventy-two years I served him as well as I could. Whatever I did, I did honestly, that's all written down in the Lord's book. The Lord's more just than any tsar. . . ." Again the weakness came over him, and he tugged at Matvei's sleeve. "Why doesn't the priest come? I'm in a bad way. Send Shakir for him—hurry!"

Matvei ran out into the entranceway, where he found the Tatar crouching in a corner with his hands over his face, muttering to himself. Out in the yard Natalya was rushing about, and from her hysterical cries he learned that the doctor was in a drunken sleep from which nobody could rouse him, that the priest from St. Nikola's had gone fishing in the mill-pond, and the Varvarinsky priest was ill, having been so badly stung by bees that he could not open his swollen eyes.

From the porch Matvei glanced through the open doors of the barn into the clearing, strung with grey strands of hemp.

I'm the one who'll have to see to all that now, he thought to himself.

He felt drawn back to Pushkaryov; the kitchen window was open, he could hear the soldier whispering and Shakir uttering short plaintive exclamations:

"Rest in peace, friend. True friend."

Then the Tatar's head appeared in the window.

"Master!" he called.

The soldier looked more charred than ever, his grey hair and beard stood up like porcupine bristles and his face wore a stern and solemn expression. There was scarcely a glint of life in his little eyes, now filled with tears of death. The fingers of his right hand, bent to make the sign of the cross, lay motionless on his heart.

"He doesn't hear," said Shakir, pushing his skull-cap from one ear to the other. "His hand doesn't move."

"You here... Matvei?" asked the soldier. "Put my fingers... in the sign... of the cross..."

"I put them already," said Shakir.

"Cross my hands... on my breast... where's the priest, damn you?"

A dark ribbon of blood trickled slowly over the floor.

It'll soak into the cellar and smell, thought Matvei with a little shudder.

The soldier's jaw fell open, but his lips kept on moving, whispering his last words:

"'Into thy hands'—don't forget Savateika and Zosima. ... Farewell, Matvei. Shakir here?"

"Here, friend, here."

The Tatar was standing staring into his open palms and whispering to himself, as if reading from an invisible book.

"Tell your Uncle Rakhmetulla... I thank him for his friendship. If you need anything, Matvei... ask him—Rakhmetulla... he can do anything... good man... Tell him... I'm glad he was my friend..."

At this point the tall grey-haired convent priest came in.

"Leave us alone," he said gently with a glance at the dying man.

"You saw," said the Tatar to Matvei when they were sitting outside in the yard. "How much blood! He lived to the last drop."

"I'll miss him," said Matvei with feeling. "Miss him terribly. I didn't mind it so much when my own father died."

"I knew him when I was a little boy. Now I'm a grown-up Tatar and I cry. He held me between his knees, he pretended to play fife and drum. Twenty years ago. Uncle Rakhmetulla told him: 'You're a Russian but you have a good heart, a Tatar heart; you have a round head, a Tatar head, a true head. One God.' "

Matvei glanced up at the Tatar.

"Don't you like Russians?" he said in an injured tone.

"A Tatar speaks the truth: he likes all good men, he hates all bad men. The Russian—he likes nobody, neither good nor bad. The Russian tells many lies. Pushkaryov—he didn't tell lies, he told the truth. My people are simple people; they like the truth."

The Tatar went on talking, but Matvei did not listen to him. Through the window came the soft voice of the priest administering extreme unction. Some crows on the roof of the Bubnov house were ruffling their feathers in the sun.

Presently the priest came out and said simply:

"You may come now and take leave of him who is setting out on the journey from which there is no return."

Shakir called the workmen. The crows fluttered their wings and cocked a suspicious eye at the people in the yard. Workmen appeared on all sides and made for the kitchen. They walked with their eyes bent on the ground, their hands tightening their belts or combing the hemp out of their beards.

As they entered the kitchen Matvei heard Natalya saying under her breath:

"They should lay coins on his eyes, else they'll go glassy and won't shut . . ."

"And tie up his chin," added Matvei dully, glancing at the livid face of the dead man over the shoulders of those who had gathered in the kitchen.

With that he went out into the clearing and sat there for a long time watching bearded Mikhailo walking backwards down the lines of twine, polishing it first with horsehair, then with a wet cloth. He was waving his arms as if resisting someone who was forcing him to walk backwards when he wanted to walk forwards. A bobbin rolled under his foot. He kicked it away, but the wooden cone described a semicircle that brought it back under his foot. Again Mikhailo kicked it without looking down, and again it rolled back.

The fool! Why doesn't he kick it harder? thought Matvei.

His eyes were dazzled by the numerous strings of hemp with little silver needles of waste clinging to them. From time to time a brief word was uttered by the workmen tied to these quivering grey strings, which created the illusion of extending out and out into space.

What has all this to do with me? Why shouldn't I get rid of it and go away? thought Matvei.

The mild spring day was dissolving in a pale sky, last year's weeds were rustling in the breeze, and the sated herd, drowsy and contented, was lowing softly as it came home from the fields. The moist breath of the newly-thawed earth gave promise of succulent grass and an abundance of wild flowers. A cooper was hammering away and a vociferous little bell was calling parishioners to Lenten service. From the convent garden came youthful laughter and the voices of the young folk who were digging there. Sparrows twittered, larks sang and a pale blue haze rose from the hills beyond the town.

And behind all these sounds and movements could be detected the soft breathing of May: the silken stir of young grass, the unfurling of moist new leaves, the popping of buds on boughs. Everything was saturated with the heady wine of spring. It was as if the air were laced by taut strings that, in response to the delicate touch of invisible

fingers, gave forth tuneful music to awaken the first flowers and rouse new hopes in the heart of man.

The youth was moved to tears by a contemplation of his own prospects, and of all the dreariness spreading round about him and melting into the cheerless low-hanging sky.

All the good people go away from here, he thought with a slight twinge of resentment. If a person's the least bit better than the others, either he dies, or runs away like Sozont and Markov, or is driven away, like the deacon.

Shakir came up, doffed his cap, and asked him for some money.

"Put your cap on," snapped Matvei in embarrassment. "What are you thinking of!"

The Tatar gave a faint smile.

"I'm afraid to speak. You're thinking."

"Don't you be afraid too," said Matvei in a soft and friendly voice. "It's me who's afraid of everything."

"Cheer up," said the Tatar with an encouraging toss of his head. "You mustn't think dull thoughts. Everything will be all right. Spring will come and we'll talk business you and me. We must dig a grave, we must bury the old man."

Pushkaryov was buried on a rainy day and very few people attended his funeral. Even some of the beggars were too lazy to turn out.

Shakir walked beside the funeral procession. He wore no hat, only his Tatar skull-cap, which grew shiny with rain and sent a little stream of water trickling down his brown cheek. From time to time he would lift a hand to his face and bend his head. His wet hands glistened and trembled and he did not look where he was going. He kept on stumbling into puddles. Whenever he did so the people following the coffin would pass insulting remarks.

Matvei could see they regarded the Tatar with suspicion, and he heard someone behind him mutter disapprovingly:

"A pagan like him at a Christian funeral!"

"Surely they won't let him into the cemetery!" was the response.

Matvei himself was not sure that Shakir would be admitted to the graveyard. He glanced at the rain-drenched Tatar and thought to himself: Life must be hard for him.

The rain grew heavier. It beat more noisily on the roofs and shook the branches of the trees. The gurgling of the streams in the gutters became gayer and the smacking of the mud under the boots of the workmen striding swiftly ahead with the long, light coffin on their shoulders grew louder. The townsfolk ran for shelter, leaving no one to follow the coffin but beggars and those who had been close friends of the dead man.

Stepan Pushkaryov, gallant soldier, was buried beside Pelageya. The wet, pimply-faced priest from St. Nikola's hastily intoned the burial service, the deacon swung the censer noisily, then both of them, picking up the skirts of their cassocks, made a dash for the watchman's hut. Mikhailo, Ivan and Yakim lowered the coffin hurriedly and began throwing in the wet earth. They pushed it in with their spades and boots, and the thudding of it upon the coffin lid was like the pounding of a wet drum. Bright drops of rain from the slender branches of the birches and the sturdy boughs of the pines fell into the grave together with the earth.

Matvei pressed his face against the oaken cross on Pelageya's grave and wept.

"Come, come, Matvei Savelyevich," said Mikhailo in a hollow voice, "it's time to go home."

Through his tears and a grey veil of rain Matvei saw the Tatar standing with his face to the east. His cap was lying on the grass at his feet, beaten out of shape by the rain.

"Wait," said Matvei, nodding towards the Tatar.

Everyone turned to look at Shakir's bent back and round head, glistening with rain.

"Hm," murmured Mikhailo, "an unbeliever, but he seems to have feelings."

"The soldier was a good soul," mused Ivan. "Harsh, but a good soul."

They stood there in silence, with hunched shoulders, shaking the drops out of their beards.

"Who'll be in charge now?" asked Mikhailo.

Matvei did not answer.

"Oh, well, who cares? It makes no difference," said Ivan, heaving a deep sigh.

Then each of them remarked in turn, without looking at the master or at one another:

"So long as he knows the business. . . ."

"He can be a Tatar, or even a Chuvash or a Mordovian. . . ."

"All that's asked of us is work. . . ."

Behind their feigned indifference Matvei detected ill-concealed hopes and growing resentment.

It'll be hard for Shakir, he thought. Perhaps even harder than for me.

He walked home beside the Tatar, followed by the workmen. From time to time one of them would blow the rain out of his beard with a loud snort.

From that day Matvei was like a traveller riding in a sledge over a smooth wintry road. The long, monotonous journey is without aim or purpose, the movement of the sledge induces a state of drowsiness that snuffs out all thoughts and feelings. From time to time the sledge jolts over a rut or swerves to one side, at which the traveller raises a heavy head, but after sleepily surveying the familiar scene, he relapses into a state of lethargy.

Deep down within him, as in the earth under its blanket of snow, lie the seeds of unrealized thoughts and un-

developed feelings. And, all unnoticed, the seeds of new impressions make their way through the thick blanket of his indifference, of his lamentable lack of faith in his own powers, penetrating into the secret depths of his heart and weighing it down. But in most cases they die together with the man, without ever reaching the light and warmth essential for the development of all life, be it within or without.

PART TWO

For a week or so a fine rain had been falling, swishing on the roofs, lashing at the trees, sighing and weeping. It would stop for an hour or two and then begin again; a fine dust of rain.

The town grew sodden and bloated; it seemed to be melting. Streams and rivulets flowed everywhere. The saturated earth, unable to absorb any more moisture, resembled an old beggar woman broken out in a rash of bubbles and wearing puddles for patches.

The sun seemed to have gone out; its light was dispersed over the earth in a murky greyness, making it impossible to say what time it was in the empty streets that were sinking silently, unprotestingly, into the mud. But there were times when, for an hour or two, a cold, formless glow appeared in the grey-blue sky. The old women called it "the dead man's sun."

Matvei Kozhemyakin was sitting at the window gazing listlessly into the orchard where the rain was snatching the last leaves off the trees. They fell straight with the rain, then leaped up as they approached the surface of the running streams.

Shakir came in.

"A woman and a little boy are in the kitchen, they're wet," he said with a grin.

"Who are they?" asked Matvei in surprise.

"Don't know. Three days she's been looking for rooms. No rooms."

"Not in our town."

Shakir pushed his skull-cap to the back of his head and touched the tip of his moustache.

"Shall we give her the attic?" he said. "There's nobody in the attic. Why not? Much fun little boy."

"Just as you like," agreed Matvei abstractedly. "Is it fit to live in?"

"She can look."

"Nobody has ever lived up there."

"You charge one ruble," said the Tatar with a wink, and went out.

Matvei's thoughts—shy, languid little thoughts—were always accompanied by shadows: every thought that occurred to him trailed a listless negation after it. This made it difficult for him to centre his attention on any particular thought in the slow stream that skimmed over a fixed and solid surface. This surface was his soul's mute protest against the life he lived.

He heard people moving about on the floor above and said to himself: The lodger. Like a pox on me. If she's young, there'll be gossip, and the child'll be a nuisance—noisy, throw stones, break windows. Why should I put up with it?

Shakir came back.

"She'll pay one ruble," he said gaily.

"Listen, tell her she's got to be quiet, the landlord won't put up with any noise."

"They're quiet," the Tatar assured him with a chuckle.

What does he find so amusing? Matvei wondered.

At breakfast the next morning Natalya smiled and said:

"She's a funny one, Matvei Savelyevich, that new lodger of yours. You can't think how funny she is!"

Shakir threw back his head, his face broke into little wrinkles of laughter, he bent towards his master and wriggled his fingers in front of his nose.

"She cleans her teeth with a brush," he said, choking with laughter.

"Wha-at?" exclaimed Matvei, incredulous.

"It's true, it's true!" gloated Natalya. "And with white powder. She keeps it in a little tin."

"Why, do her teeth ache?" said Matvei.

"She didn't say so." Natalya's fat face was slit by a grin from ear to ear as she went babbling on: "She must come from far away and anyone can see she's not the ordinary run, very polite: she's all 'thank yous' and 'if you pleases.' I fetched her a pail of water and she thanked me: 'Thank you,' says she, 'but why did you do it? I could have fetched it myself,' says she. 'Please don't trouble yourself.'"

"Is she pretty?" asked Matvei.

"Quite. She's got round shoulders and breasts like a maid. There's a serious look in her eyes, but she smiles very soft and gentle-like."

"Is she young?"

"Judging by the child, must be five and twenty. Or even more. Where *could* she come from?" Natalya sighed, then added: "A very touching lady. All her worldly goods are in two baskets and a leather trunk with brass fittings."

The wind banged at the window and sprayed it with rain; in the yard drops of water plopped into the rain barrel. Shakir smiled contentedly as he sipped his tea; Natalya sang a sentimental song; Matvei glanced round with an uneasiness he could not explain.

"Let's not talk about her any more," he said, dropping his eyes. "She can live here as long as she's quiet. What about the child?"

"Very friendly. I go in and there he is all covered in soap. 'Hullo!' says he. 'What's your name?' True as I'm sitting here."

"Well, if they're friendly, we'll be friendly too," declared the master in a burst of geniality.

Shakir nodded his approval, but Natalya said, as if ashamed:

"If it wasn't for her teeth! Too funny, that! Pushes a bone brush inside her mouth and goes swishing about with it! It's a mercy she doesn't make a hole in her cheek!"

After dinner the clouds broke, revealing a patch of blue sky which was reflected in the puddles of the yard. And there, beside the biggest puddle, squatted a little boy with curly hair and a sharp little nose. He was shouting something as he pushed a block of wood about the puddle, and the water kept wrinkling up as if smiling back at him.

Quietly Matvei opened the window. The child's ringing voice was carried into the room:

. . . Or a vision fair?
Or can the tsar
Have heard my prayer?

Beside the porch stood Shakir, his head cocked, one hand plucking at his beard, and in the doorway of the barn the lop-sided porter Markusha was rocking back and forth on his crooked legs. Matvei drew back so that he could study the child unobserved.

Rather thin. Skinny legs. I was different at his age—better fed, he thought.

Memories of his childhood surged within him, soothing his spirit. The little boy stood up, wiped his hands on his trousers, threw out his arms, and sang louder than ever, clipping out each word distinctly:

Ah, fre-e-e-dom, blessed fre-e-e-dom!

Presently he rolled up his trousers and, lifting a leg as red and stringy as a goose's, stepped bravely into the puddle, shouting in a deep bass voice:

No-o-thing is so dear!

His left trouser-leg fell into the water; the singer jumped out, slipped, and found himself on all fours.

"Drat it!" he exclaimed, shaking the mud off his fingers.

Matvei Savelyevich leaned out of the window and said sympathetically:

"Your mother'll give it to you now!"

The child squatted down again and washed his hands in the puddle.

"I'm not afraid," he said with a smile, lifting a face with dark eyebrows and lashes and framed in fair curls.

"What's your name?"

"Boris. What's yours?"

"Matvei."

Matvei lifted a hand to hide his smile, the hand touched his beard, and he hastened to amend his statement: "Uncle Matvei. Matvei Savelyevich."

The child put his hands in his pockets and screwed up his eyes.

"Are you the landlord?" he asked.

"Yes. Why?"

"Nothing," said Boris, but presently he added, "I say, you are fat!"

"That means you've never seen anyone who was really fat."

"Oh, haven't I!" said Boris with a little laugh. "I've seen lots and lots. Why, in Kainsk where I come from—"

"Where's that?"

"Kainsk, haven't you ever heard of Kainsk?"

"What province is it in?"

"It's not in a province, it's in Siberia," corrected the child in a pedantic tone.

Matvei pushed back the potted plants and leaned out of the window. Shakir was gone and Markusha was shuffling bear-like about the barn.

"Why were you living in Siberia?" asked Matvei in a low tone.

The child looked at him in perplexity a moment before he replied with a broad grin:

"You are funny! Because that's where they built the town, in Siberia. They built your town here and they built that one there. That's all."

"I see," said Matvei hastily. "Wherever a town's built, that's where it stands. Can you read and write?"

"Of course I can," said Boris with a little shrug of surprise.

"So can I," said Matvei, but his interlocutor seemed to have lost interest; he picked up a stick and gazed at the sky, which was again sprinkling wet dust over the earth.

"Boris!" came a clear feminine voice. "Hadn't you better come in? It's raining."

On the porch stood a tall woman in a dark dress. Her features were pale and severe, her hair was combed back smoothly, she looked like a nun. There seemed to be something sombre and unyielding in her nature that made her one with the cloudy weather. On seeing Kozhemyakin at the window, she had no doubt guessed that he was the owner of the house, but she did not bow to him.

"Please come in, son," she said.

"Please!" said Matvei to himself as he closed the window. "Please" to her own child!

The brief autumn day was quickly swallowed up in the damp darkness of evening. A bare rowan branch knocked at the window. Gusts of wind blew fine tears across the pane. Lachrymose little sounds came seeping through the walls of the house.

Since the death of the gallant Pushkaryov, thirteen autumns had wept for him. The empty years, all of them monotonously alike, had passed slowly, like dark pilgrims wending their way to do homage, leaving nothing behind but a boredom so habitual that one became unaware of it, as one becomes unaware of a comfortable boot on one's foot.

But today the boredom was tinged with uneasiness. Fretful thoughts burst like grey bubbles in Matvei's mind.

He felt an urge to go up into the attic and say to that woman:

Who are you? Why have you come from Siberia? Why do you say "please" to your own child? And why do you brush your teeth with white powder?

But as he paced the floor in the twilight a newly-enlightened corner of his soul told him such questions were foolish. It would be better to think of the child.

A little fighting-cock! he said to himself.

As soon as he had said it, it was as if the child's little hands, red with cold, gave the wheel of memory a push that set it spinning slowly and reluctantly, unwinding the grey ribbon of the past. On and on it spun as Matvei shuffled softly across the floor in his felt slippers. At last his memories brought him to Pelageya, and this turned his thoughts once more to his new lodger.

She must be the wife of an official, he thought. She's a proud one; didn't even bow to me.

Natalya came in.

"Shall I light the lamp?" she asked softly.

"Not yet. I'll light it myself."

With a sigh she told him that when the stove was lit in the attic the room became filled with smoke and the lodger and her little boy had to lie on the floor to avoid choking.

"Why don't they come down here?" asked Matvei. "I don't bite."

"Shakir climbed up on the roof and found a crow's nest in the chimney."

"Not surprising."

Again Natalya sighed and, hanging her head, said guiltily:

"There's a policeman here."

"What does he want?"

"I don't know. Something about the new lodger."

"I knew as much," growled Matvei. "You and Shakir are always fancying things."

He went out into the kitchen, but the policeman had gone. A lamp was burning on the table and beside it lay a wooden dipper that smelt of beer. Shakir was sitting at the table tapping the dipper with his finger. Natalya, her hands clasped under her apron, went and stood beside the stove. It was plain at a glance that both of them were frightened. Matvei himself felt frightened when they told him that the policeman had ordered them to keep a sharp eye on the lodger, that she was forbidden to leave the town, and that those in whose house she lived were obliged to report to the police everything she did and said.

This aroused vague fears, but it also excited a curiosity that grew with every word they spoke. The three sat looking from one to another, blinking with consternation, speaking in undertones. Shakir even turned down the lamp.

"What could she have done?" Matvei asked in a tense voice.

"Make false money?" said Shakir.

"She doesn't look that sort," said Natalya.

"You can't tell what sort people are by their looks," observed Kozhemyakin.

"Maybe she did something to her husband," mused Natalya. "She's got a stern face. Perhaps she put something in a cake she baked."

"Hold your tongue!" cried Shakir.

The police inspired in all the inhabitants of Okurov mixed feelings, which were handed down from one generation to the next. They all hated the police, but feared them and truckled to them. They could not imagine why such an institution was necessary, yet they ran to it the moment anything happened. And now, in the present instance, their minds turned to the police.

"Have you told her about the policeman?" asked Kozhemyakin.

"No."

"You'd better."

"Yes," said Shakir. "Who is she?—I don't know. Who is the police?—I know too well."

Natalya became flustered.

"She's a lone soul, without a husband. Who knows what they want with her? So young. . . . Yes, I'll go and tell her."

Kozhemyakin considered a moment.

"Wait," he said. "Heat the samovar. Shakir, come with me."

When they were in his room he lit the lamp and addressed the Tatar in the tone of one deciding a weighty matter.

"It's all the same to us: the police or this strange woman. We want only one thing: to go on living in peace and quiet. So I'll send for her and put it to her point-blank: what does it mean? And if it turns out there's something really wrong—well, let her get out, that's all."

"Mm, yes," said Shakir glumly, bending down to turn back the folded end of the runner on the floor. On straightening up, he heaved a sigh and went out.

Kozhemyakin went over to the mirror. The glass reflected a face with a broad forehead, puffy cheeks elongated by a blond beard and blue eyes that were not too clear and had a cheerless light in them. He had always disliked his face, finding it expressionless and, despite the beard, effeminate. Today he detected new faults in it.

She can't be much younger than I am, he thought anxiously.

Natalya brought in the samovar.

"Go and call her," he said quietly. "Tell her the . . . er . . . landlord would like to speak to her. Mind you're civil. Say she's to come downstairs—please. Behave as if you didn't know anything. There's no reason to hurt her feelings."

When Natalya had gone he pulled down his blouse, ran his hands over his waistcoat and stood listening in the

middle of the room. Presently he heard heels clicking on the stairs, the door opened, and into the room came a woman in a dark skirt and a plaid shawl. She was tall and slender and her hair was combed back smoothly. Her cheeks and forehead might have been carved of snow, her eyebrows were drawn, forming an angry little line between them, and beneath her eyes were shadows of sorrow or weariness. Unable to meet her gaze, Kozhemyakin made a little bow and pushed forward a chair without raising his eyes.

"Good-morning," he said haltingly, almost apologetically. "Here—if you please. And may I offer you a cup of tea? If you don't find it presumptuous—"

"Oh, not at all."

This time her voice was softer and more gentle than when she had spoken in the yard. He glanced at her: her face, too, had changed; there was no line between her eyebrows and her dark eyes were smiling.

Women are always like that, he thought. Try and find out what she's really like!

He gave an embarrassed little cough and asked her name.

"Yevgenia Petrovna Mansurova," said the lodger, enunciating each syllable very distinctly, and suddenly, with a smile, she volunteered the information he sought: "I have no passport, but don't let that disturb you; I am under the surveillance of the police and they already know I am living in your house."

Kozhemyakin was dumbfounded by her candour and simplicity. He broke into a sweat and some moments passed before he was able to stammer:

"Oh, I see."

Frightening little thoughts skipped about inside his head, bumping against his temples: So she's going to live in my house—perhaps the police have ordered her to? —to do me harm, or to make me a laughing-stock?—and what about that policeman who was here?

She went on speaking, but the words she used were unfamiliar, and with every moment she became more incomprehensible, disconcerting this uncultivated young man by the freedom of her movements and the off-handedness with which she referred to the police.

"How warm it is in here!" he heard her say. To make sure he had not mistaken her words, he repeated them:

"Yes, I like it warm in the house."

"What is it that smells so delicious?"

"Honey. Lime-blossom honey, in the comb," said Kozhemyakin, pushing one finger hard against the table and making an intense scrutiny of the steaming samovar. To his own astonishment he heard himself saying: "Take some—for your little boy."

"Thank you," said the woman in a strikingly clear voice. "That Tatar of yours is with him. He seems a very nice person."

He could understand this.

"He's been living with me fourteen years," said Matvei with a sigh of relief. "A very honest chap. Tatars are always honest. It's as if he was one of the family, not a hired man."

The shawl slipped off her round shoulders and he could see that her smooth hair was hanging down her back in a thick plait, and that a black ribbon was braided into the end of it.

She's not a young girl, why should she wear her hair hanging down in a plait? was the thought that came to him as he poured her out a cup of tea.

A smile appeared on the woman's face: born in the depths of her eyes, which were dilated to great beauty, it spread to her knitted brows, making them quiver and straighten, then to her lips, which parted to show the gleam of small white teeth; dimples appeared in her cheeks, a gentle shine emanated from all her features, and

for a moment Matvei was reminded of a face that time had almost erased from his memory.

Whose could it be? he thought. She doesn't look like Pelageya.

Now the smile faded, again the little line appeared between her brows, her lips tightened and in front of him sat a sombre stranger who evoked vague misgivings in him.

What shall I say to her? he thought as he pushed over a plate of cakes and biscuits. If only she'd smile again!

"Here, help yourself," he said in a hollow voice. "Home-made cakes. . . ."

"Thank you," she said with a friendly nod, taking one.

Her hands were narrow and beautifully modelled, and whenever she took hold of a thing her slender fingers closed round it gently and firmly.

"But don't let it worry you," she went on. "I have no intention of trying to run away."

What is she talking about? wondered Matvei, staring at her unceremoniously. There she is smiling again!

"Running away? Why should you?" he said as if trying to dissuade her. "There's nowhere to run to—woods and bogs all round. And it's not bad here, at least in the spring. And in the summer, too. Your little boy will like it. There's fish in the river, and he can go bird-catching. And there are heaps of mushrooms in the woods. Our folk go mushrooming in carts—they couldn't carry so many home in baskets."

"Has the town a gymnasium?"

"A school, you mean?"

"Yes."

"There's a school here."

"How many forms?"

"Three, I think."

"Then it isn't a gymnasium."

Matvei sighed: it did seem a pity there was no gymnasium in Okurov.

"Such a backward town!" said the woman, sighing in her turn. And she began to tell him how, while staying at the inn, she had spent four days looking for lodgings and been unable to find anything. Wherever she went she had been treated rudely or with suspicion, had been asked who she was, where she came from, why she had come here, what she intended to do, where her husband was....

"I can't understand; it's as though I were not a Russian, as if I were in a strange country and spoke a strange tongue and everyone was afraid of me!"

This feeling was familiar to him; it drew him to her and roused his sympathy.

"And where is your husband?" he asked.

She looked at him a moment before answering briefly:

"He's dead."

These words, usually so melancholy, seemed to have no painful significance for her.

"He caught cold and died," she repeated distinctly. "It's very cold in Siberia."

"Was he working there?"

The woman shrugged her shoulders.

"Not at all," she said simply. "I've already told you we were sent to Siberia; exiled, don't you understand?"

And she uttered a few more words he had never heard before. He shifted in his chair.

"What for?"

Biting her underlip, she drew her shawl over her shoulders, glanced round the room, and said gravely:

"Do you know what politics are? Have you ever heard of political crimes?"

"N-no," said Kozhemyakin, shifting uneasily and dropping his eyes under a glance that lay heavily upon him, repelling him.

"Well, I shall explain all that another time," he heard her say. Again her voice was soft and gentle: "And now,

good-bye. Thank you. I'm sure I don't know what I should have done if you had not given me your cozy little attic room."

She smiled again as she went out, and that somehow calmed the fears that had been excited by such terrifying words as "Siberia," "exile," and "political crimes." Of greatest moment was the word "politics," which for him was associated with some catastrophe; he concentrated all his powers on trying to recall what it had been and when it had occurred, but in vain.

He felt as tired as if his talk with the lodger had lasted hours. He went on sitting at the table with his hands clasped tightly behind his head while the words "Siberia" and "exile" went whistling through his mind with the sinister insistence of the wind in autumn. Yet behind them loomed other and more cheerful thoughts:

Her chin's as white as snow and it's got a dimple in it like a child's—where the angels kiss children in their sleep. And such white teeth! I wonder why she brushes them with powder?

Suddenly a dark recollection burst upon his mind. One evening several years before, on Monday, a weekday, all the big bells in all the belfries had begun to boom. The convent bell chimed with the frenzy of an hysterical woman, while the St. Nikola bell seemed to have lost control: now it struck thunderously, now scarcely touching the bronze with its tongue, causing the metal to whine and whimper.

Matvei had run out into the street, and Shakir and the workmen had rushed off in various directions, some up on to the roof to see where the fire was, but no flames were to be seen and there was no smell of smoke in the air. The town was caught up in a wave of excitement: people rushed out of all the houses, came together, shouted, dashed away and were swallowed up in a heavy spring snowstorm.

A man galloped up to the convent on a black horse, flung out his arm, and shouted at the top of his lungs:

"Stop! Stop ringing the bell!"

The booming of the St. Nikola bell sounded all the louder and more menacing.

As they ran, people speculated on the reason for the alarm: some said the church had been robbed; a shrill voice cried out that Father Vitaly had died suddenly; old Chapakov, a former soldier, declared that Napoleon's grandson had gathered troopers of twice-twenty nations, crossed the borders, and was surrounding St. Petersburg. The people themselves could not be seen for the snow and this made their cries all the more terrifying.

"The ice on the rivers has broken up before time!" wailed someone in despair. "The water's rising."

"Who said so?"

"A dispatch has come!"

"We live on a hill, no flood'll reach us!"

Voices were muffled by the darkness of evening and the whirl of snow, and the words fell like little pebbles on the heads of the crowd. The forms of houses and people rose up and vanished in the gloom. It was as if the town had been torn from its moorings and was sailing away, rocking and wailing as it went.

Then old Bazunov arrived, led by his son and son-in-law. He was bareheaded, with a black coat over his ungirdled blouse, and he put a sudden stop to the onrush by announcing in a loud hoarse voice:

"What are you bawling about? Can't you tell by the tolling of the bells that Tsar Alexander has died? Off with your hats!"

Everyone fell silent at once, and it suddenly became less fearful to walk down the street among the dark, mute forms.

Later Kozhemyakin had found himself standing in the church listening to a snivelling priest read the announce-

ment of the tsar's assassination. All his life he remembered the sad and awe-inspiring words:

"The inscrutable will of Providence has been fulfilled. . . ."

He had found in them something distantly familiar, something connected with the whole of life in manifold ways.

He had been troubled by the behaviour of Shakir, who was also standing in the church wagging his head and muttering to himself as if he had toothache. Matvei was afraid the townsfolk would notice him and fall upon him.

But the church was almost in darkness. Only on the altar and in front of particularly revered icons were lamps and candles lit, throwing spots of meagre yellow light on the sombre faces of the saints. The shadows blurred shapes and blotted out features; it was as if the church were filled with one enormous, wheezing, headless body, above which, in the pulpit, swayed the form of the priest suspended in air.

Matvei emerged from the church dazed and with a headache, as if he had been poisoned by charcoal fumes. As they stood with bared heads in the churchyard, Shakir scratched his chest and clicked his tongue.

"Why did they do such a thing?" he said. "Ah! Such bad people, such mischief!"

"Hush," said Kozhemyakin. "Listen to what they're saying."

They said many things in many ways, but all in dismal, hushed, cautious voices.

"I'll bet the English bribed them to do it."

"Or the Turks."

"Yes, the Turks. It's just like the Turks."

"Because he licked them."

"Look out, Shakir, they may start going for you," whispered Kozhemyakin to the Tatar.

Shakir grew angry.

"Me? I'm no Turk. I live in Russia. I like Russians!"

But there was that low, ominous, diminishing murmur:

"It's not the first time they tried to do him in."

"Who tried?"

"Those—er—"

"Those—er—who?"

"How do I know? Ask the police. They're the ones who know such things."

"Big changes are to be expected now, townsmen!" broke in a shrill eager voice.

This statement was met with hopeful enthusiasm:

"Yes, indeed!"

"Changes? Hm—"

"Weren't there changes after the death of Tsar Nicholas?"

"I should say so! First of all, the tax. . . ."

"Heaven spare us another!"

"And the peasants got their freedom. . . ."

"And general conscription. . . ."

"That hit a lot of people hard."

"And brought riches to many others."

"The Lord preserve us from such changes!"

Someone standing behind Matvei growled ferociously:

"It's all those bigwigs, those country gentlemen, and their politics. The shoe pinches, see? It's all their doing. They'd like to see the peasants back in chains—"

"True," yelled Bazunov. "It's all those country gentlemen —all their doing."

Some twenty of the town's eminent citizens vied with each other in decrying the rich landowners—their greed, extravagance, cruelty, pride and all the other vices of the despised gentry.

"Who do these men think they are?" growled Shakir.

"Saints," replied Kozhemyakin quietly. "Come, let's go home."

It was high time they did. A tall man in a shaggy cap was waving his arm over the heads of the people and shouting:

"Wait, you rascal! What's your name? Hey, policeman! I'll show you, you trouble-maker! Hold him, Zakhar. And what's your name, old man? Bazunov? Ah ha!"

Kozhemyakin and Shakir went away. At a distance of only ten paces the snow smothered the wailing voices of the crowd, the street grew quiet, and all the noise seemed to have slipped out of the town into the silence of the white fields.

Today, here in his room, all this came back to him in a vivid, concentrated memory: it rose before his eyes like writing inscribed in burning letters on the wall of the temple, threatening and intimidating him and giving rise to contradictory thoughts:

Let her find some other place to live. Her son sings of the tsar—of the tsar, bless his heart!—while his mother? just look at her! Where is she to go? There are no lodgings to be had, and if there were, the townsfolk wouldn't offer them to her. They'd be more likely to beat her. That's a fact.

Natalya came in.

"Shall I take out the samovar?" she asked cheerfully.

"Send Shakir to me quick!"

Shakir, too, was in high spirits.

"Why are you grinning? Sit down."

The Tatar sat down, smiling and shaking his head.

"Do you know why she was sent to Siberia?" asked Kozhemyakin softly. "Remember when the tsar was assassinated? She's one of them."

Shakir shook his head.

"She went to Siberia before. Four years before," and he changed the subject before his master had a chance to put in a word. "Boris knows everything. Such a fine boy! Oh, yes, they are fine people! Oh, yes!"

"What's so fine about them?" asked Matvei, pleased but unconvinced.

"Oh, everything. Very fine!"

"Stop oh-ing and tell me in plain language."

The Tatar gave a wave of his hand and laughed.

"Everything's fine. He likes everybody—you, me—everybody the same. Such a merry boy! I say, 'Madam.' She says, 'Not madam: just Yevgenia Petrovna.' I say: 'Madam Yevgenia Petrovna.' She says: 'then call Natalya madam too. All ladies are madam.' I laugh and Boris laughs and she laughs—laughs and cries, it's so very funny!"

"You say she laughed?" asked Matvei sceptically.

"Laughed a lot. Threw her head back and laughed and laughed."

Noisily he sucked his tea out of the saucer, burnt his tongue, shifted the saucer from hand to hand, blew on the tea and kept on talking. His vivacity and the joyful gleam in his eye dispelled Matvei's fears.

"What did she say?" he asked.

"Many things. Oh, how simple she is!"

"Well, enough of her," said Kozhemyakin resolutely with a sigh of relief. "But don't you tell anyone she's one of . . . er . . . one of those."

"Why should I tell? Who would believe me?"

"Everyone's ready to believe the worst. Our people are a spiteful lot, they're capable of anything. As for her, it's none of our business who she is. All we want is that she should live quietly and unnoticed, as we do, that's all."

For some time he went on explaining something to Shakir that was not clear even to himself. The Tatar sat with the sweat pouring down his face, blinking his eyes to keep from falling asleep.

While they were having supper in the kitchen that evening, Natalya talked about nothing but the new lodger; she was highly pleased with the mother and her child and curious to know more about them.

"She's so nice and genteel! Like a real gentlewoman!"

"It's just that you've never met decent people," said Matvei, who was gradually feeling reassured. "You've

never seen anybody else, so she's all this and that to you. But mind you don't go wagging your tongue, Natalya, in the market and other places. After all, she *is* mixed up with the police."

They looked at each other without saying a word.

Kozhemyakin drummed on the table with his fingers, fully aware that there was a mystery in his life now and that there was no evading it.

Not that I want to, he thought with resignation. Let come what will. What difference does it make?

He recalled that Shakir, the first year he had lived in his house, had laughed with the light-hearted abandon of a child, but that later he had lost the knack: his laughter had turned into a grunt; stilted and disagreeable. But now he was laughing in the old way.

He's fond of children, that is, if they don't tease him with sow's ears or throw stones at him, he thought.

As he lay in bed at night he heard soft footsteps moving about upstairs, and he liked it. Formerly he had heard nothing but the mice in the attic, or the wind that came through the broken window, banging doors and rummaging in corners. On cold quiet winter nights, when the wolves stood in the fields looking towards the town, howling mournfully and covetously, the attic was filled with an eerie drone that was its sympathetic response to their howling, and the sound conjured up all sorts of terrible memories: Pelageya covered in blood, his father struck down by paralysis, the mysterious disappearance of Sozont, the grey clots of Klucharev's brain and the grey clots of his dreams; he recalled the Dog Mother, and Alyosha the pious half-wit, and he made a prodigious effort to recall what Shin-Shan the beggar looked like.

When winter storms shrieked and whirled over the town, burying the houses up to the roofs in snow, beating against walls and shutters with their tattered wings, he fancied that some soft, silent, enormous creature, curling

itself up into a ball of rags, was rolling from one end of the earth to the other, felling forests, filling chasms, crushing towns and villages and pressing the ruins into the earth, or into its own hideous headless body. Noiselessly, unobtrusively, it swallowed up human beings as it rolled on, growing bigger and bigger, leaving nothing in its wake but waste land, and a lugubrious cry hanging in the air:

"He-elp!"

The days were so filled with small tasks that the first month in which the lodger lived at Kozhemyakin's flew by before he realized it. Shakir had talked him into resetting the stove in the attic, laying new floors, and doing countless other repairs. Matvei had pulled a long face.

"All this will cost me more than she'll pay in two years," he had protested.

"What of it?" the Tatar had replied cheerfully. "Tatars say: 'A good man is worth more than money.'"

"It's not so much the money as the bother I'm thinking of; all the hammering and sawing—"

While the attic was being repaired the lodger and her son occupied the downstairs room where Pelageya had died. Kozhemyakin had proposed this himself, but as soon as he found her living next to him he felt embarrassed, even frightened, by her proximity, and so he went away on a trip to buy hemp.

On the way the same listless, burdensome, two-faced thoughts of her weighed on his mind without buoying up his heart.

Only one thing was clear to him:

She, too, is a stranger here, much like myself. . . .

This was a welcome thought, and it made him anxious to get back to her.

On returning home and discovering that Pelageya's room was empty, he sighed and felt a pang of regret.

Winter came. Every morning the mud of the road, the bare branches of the trees, the tin roofs of houses and churches, were covered with bluish hoarfrost. A cold wind dispersed the mists of autumn, and the air, so recently damp and foggy, became invigorating. Vast, empty spaces came into view, the woods grew darker and the dry grass could be seen waving dismally on the naked hills encircling the town.

The recruits had already celebrated their leave-taking, less boisterously than usual this year: they only tore out three lampposts in the market-place, broke the windows of the Rural Supervisor's house, and pulled down part of the fence round the St. Nikola churchyard to make clubs while engaging in fisticuffs with the settlement lads.

In Balymery the nephew of the rich peasant Mokei Chapunov was so terrified by the thought of having to serve in the army that he tried to hang himself, but he was cut down in time and marched off.

Evenings grew endless. Formerly Matvei had spent them sitting in the kitchen reading aloud religious tracts while Natalya sewed, Shakir carried on Pushkaryov's duties, and Markusha, the lop-sided yard porter, sat on the floor whittling wands out of which he made strong and ornamental bird-cages. Sometimes they would play simple card games, "Donkey," or "Yours Is Trump." At other times they just sat and gossiped or listened to Markusha's accounts of the things people believed in, of witches and wizards, the tricks of hobgoblins and other evil spirits and the searches made for buried treasure.

But now the one who commanded most attention in the kitchen was the lodger's son. Early in the morning this vivacious curly-headed youngster with the fine nose and lively eyes that took in everything, would come running downstairs and hold out a hand with broken finger-nails:

"I've come to help you, Natalya," he would announce in a matter-of-fact way.

And he would sit down next to her in his coarse trousers, leather-soled felt boots, brown jacket that looked as if it had been cut down from a man's coat, and sealskin cap, always pushed on to the back of his head. As he helped her scrape carrots and peel potatoes he would reply to all her questions in a worldly tone.

"How ever did you come such a long distance?" she once asked.

"Simple enough, in a coach."

"What a lot of towns you must have seen!"

He narrowed his eyes and began to count them:

"Yekaterinburg, Perm, Sarapul, but the best was Kazan. There's a circus there, and they've got a horse that looks like a tiger."

"Good gracious!"

"Striped all over, with long legs, and there's no hiding anything from that horse!"

When he had given a detailed account of the tiger-like horse, he brushed the potato peelings off his knees and turned to Shakir.

"Shakir," he said, "give me something else to do."

"Come along. We'll go to rope works."

The workmen greeted the child with broad grins and curious glances.

"Good-morning to you!"

"Good-morning, gentlemen," Boris would say gravely, doffing his cap. "God be with you!"

"Thank you," the "gentlemen" would reply as they shuffled over the hard-packed earth in their bast sandals.

"Markusha! Give me something to do!"

"Here you are, lad," Markusha would wheeze. He had tiny slits of eyes in a face with high cheek bones and overgrown with red beard, and when he spoke to Boris his big mouth stretched in a grin to his pointed hairy ears, revealing big yellow teeth.

"Beware of him, Boris!" the workmen once warned the child. "He's a wizard, he'll put a spell on you."

"Wizards are only in fairy-tales," said the seven-year-old child contemptuously. "They're not in real life."

The men's chuckles shook the damp air, which was filled with the sweetish scent of hay.

"Well, I never!"

"Hear that, Markusha?"

"That's done for you, Markusha."

Half-blind Ivan patted him on the back.

"Oh, what a sharp one! Oh, what a clever bit of bone!" he chuckled.

Markusha's belly shook, but Shakir narrowed anxious eyes on the men.

Kozhemyakin, overawed by what he saw of the child, avoided getting into conversation with him. Several earlier attempts had ended unsatisfactorily: he had not understood Boris's questions or answers and had found many of them impudent.

"Do you like living with me?" he had once asked him.

The boy blinked and pushed his cap to the back of his head.

"What makes you think I live with you?"

"Well, er, whose house is it? And the yard? And the rope works?"

"And the town?"

"The town belongs to the tsar."

Boris reflected.

"What do you do?" he said at last.

"Me? I own a rope—"

"No," interrupted Boris with a stamp of his foot. "What do you *do*?"

"Me? Why, I'm the master, I keep my eye on things."

"I never see you about."

"What did your father do?"

"My father?"

"Yes."

Boris frowned and considered again.

"He read books and wrote letters and drew maps. He was very ill. He coughed all the time, even at night. And then he died."

With a swift glance round the yard, overcast with a leaden sky, the child walked off, and as the thirty-year-old man watched him go he thought: He's lying about something.

On another occasion Matvei said to him:

"How's your mother? Is she well?"

The child made a little bow.

"Yes, thank you."

Fancy that, now! exclaimed Kozhemyakin to himself, impressed by the child's courtesy.

"Is she lonely?"

"She's a grown-up," replied the child instructively. "It's only children who feel lonely."

"Well, I'm a grown-up, too, but I'm lonely."

"Then read something," advised Boris. "*Robinson Crusoe* or *The Russian Magazine*. But *Robinson Crusoe* would be better."

The Russian Magazine, I wonder what that's about, thought Matvei.

Every time they talked together the boy left some festering splinter in Kozhemyakin's mind. He was amazed by the child's ready tongue. Boris's lack of respect for his elders made Matvei almost dislike him, and he took his friendship with Shakir as a snub to himself. Sometimes the child would ask questions to which there were no answers. He would knit his brows in the same way that his mother did and say:

"Why are there so many crows here?"

"Who can tell?"

"Oh, aren't you allowed to tell?"

"Of course I am, but—what difference does it make?"

"Do you like them?"

"Crows? They're not good to eat."

"Neither are canaries, but you like them all the same."

"That's because they sing."

This answer seemed satisfactory enough, but presently Boris said:

"Do people only like what they can eat or what sings?"

Kozhemyakin was ruffled by such questions; it seemed to him that the little monkey asked them simply to show he was as clever as the grown-ups.

One day, as they were sitting in the kitchen, Markusha said to Boris:

"A cat, my lad, is the cleverest of animals: it can see three elbow-lengths into the ground. Wizards always keep cats so that they can ask their advice; they're all demons in disguise, cats are. When a cat dies, smoke comes out of its eyes because there's fire in them, and if you stroke its back at night it throws off sparks. The cat's a very ancient animal. God made humans, but the devil made cats, and he told them: watch what the humans are up to, keep a sharp eye on them!"

"Have you ever seen a devil?" demanded Boris severely.

"Heaven preserve us! I hope I never shall!"

"Have you, Uncle Matvei?"

"Of course not. Where should I see one?"

"See? You're just making fun of me because I'm small. Nobody's ever seen a devil, and there aren't any devils. Mummy says devils are just nonsense."

He screwed up his eyes and peered into the dark corners of the kitchen.

"If there were any, or hobgoblins for that matter, I'd have found them long ago. I climb into all sorts of places and I've never found any; nothing but dust; I just get dirty and sneeze, that's all."

Markusha, who had been listening with his mouth open, was seized by a spasm of mirth that made his whole body

shake and the tears stream like sweat down his bearded face. Matvei threw a sidelong glance at Boris as he listened to the porter's gasping paroxysm and thought to himself:

He's an astute one, that child! If I don't look out he'll make a laughing-stock of me one of these days. There's not a scrap of fear in him and he pokes his nose into everything, like a puppy.

It made one's hair stand on end to see the boy scaling the steep and slippery roof of the barn, or swinging his legs high up among the bare branches of the trees, or climbing the fence bristling with rusty nails, falling down and swearing as he picked himself up:

"Damn it all!"

No father, no roots, thought Kozhemyakin.

Yet his interest in the child grew with every day.

His ears rang with the song Boris never tired of singing, whether his feet were on the ground or the roof or swinging in the air:

Are you but a dream
Or a vision fair?
Or can the tsar
Have heard my prayer?

"What tsar is that?"

"The one who set the peasants free."

Kozhemyakin gazed steadily into the boy's face for a while before he said softly:

"He set the peasants free, and yet they killed him."

"In battle?" asked the child eagerly.

"No. In the street. With a bomb."

"How could that happen?" said Boris with doubt and disapproval. "A tsar can only be killed in battle. Of course it was in battle if it was a bomb that killed him. There aren't any bombs in the streets."

Kozhemyakin maintained an uneasy silence. The half-

atrophied heart of this Okurov citizen was pierced by a stab of pity for the fatherless boy.

What if it turns out that his parents took part in that battle? he thought.

He found the mother's attitude toward her son more than strange.

Doesn't she love him? he wondered.

One day Boris disappeared. Shakir and Natalya raised the alarm, but when the lodger came into the kitchen she said calmly:

"There's nothing to worry about; he'll turn up. He's used to going wherever he pleases."

"Oh, dear, oh dear!" cried Natalya like a frightened hen. "Used to going wherever he pleases! How could you allow such a thing? The town's so big, and full of dogs and drunkards, and the sober ones are bad enough!"

"Let him see life as it is," said the boy's mother with a little laugh.

Is she really so unafraid? thought Matvei, and a glance at her untroubled face prompted him to say to her:

"He's only seven, you know."

"He'll be eight in January."

Matvei made a quick calculation: conceived in April.

Shakir, slapping his cap on to his head, ran into the street, and shortly afterwards came back with Boris, who, though blue with cold, was highly pleased with his adventure. Natalya rubbed his hands with vodka while he told them all about it.

"Two big boys chased me but I shook my fist at them."

"Don't tell fibs, Boris," admonished his mother.

"How do you know I was fibbing?" asked the child thoughtfully.

"Because I know you."

"They didn't really. Nothing special happened. People just walked up and down. Not many people. One man threw ice at a dog and the policeman laughed at him.

There's a dead daw without a head lying near the church."

"Now you're telling the truth," said his mother gently, stroking his curls.

"Yes," said the child, drawing a deep breath.

Kozhemyakin laughed quietly.

"All the interesting tales he had invented, and mother nipped them in the bud!"

"He's a great dreamer, but that's harmful. One must know life, not invent it."

It was as if she had written out these words in big letters. They instantly impressed themselves on Kozhemyakin's memory, but their meaning was not clear to him.

"Is it possible to invent life?"

He observed that his lodger had two manners of speaking: sometimes she spoke in an off-hand, mocking, even arrogant tone, at others she spoke earnestly, as if demanding that others should believe her. Often an expression of hostility and repugnance came into her dark eyes as they narrowed under the weight of her eyebrows and lashes, her lips twitched, her mouth looked like a prickly red flower and she would say through clenched teeth:

"But that's stupid! Idiotic!"

She would draw herself up in a defiant attitude and all the folds of her garments would fall in a straight line, like the folds of carved wooden toys, or of painted icons.

Rarely did she go into the yard or the kitchen. Natalya said she sat writing letters from morning till night, and Shakir took them to the post-office almost every day. Once Kozhemyakin, taking an envelope out of the Tatar's hands, read in astonishment:

"'His Excellency'—er—yes, 'His Excellency Georgy Konstantinovich Mansurov'—hear that, Shakir? Her name is Mansurova too. Can His Excellency be her uncle? Here, Shakir, post it quickly; mind you don't lose it!"

From that day on he made a point of bowing to her first, and his bows were deeper and more respectful.

Occasionally he came upon her in the entranceway or on the porch calling her son. She usually hummed something to herself as she walked, her brows quivering slightly, the nostrils of her large straight nose dilated. There was a pertness about her face that did not quite accord with her big, strong, handsome body. She did not mind the cold: often she would stand on a wintry day without a coat waiting for a long time for her son. Her cheeks would grow red and her hair would be covered with hoarfrost, but she did not shiver or hunch her shoulders.

Good for her! thought Matvei. She's used to living in Siberia.

He desperately wanted to talk to her on some simple cheerful subject, but he could find neither the words nor the courage.

One day Boris pricked his finger badly while combing hemp in play. Blood dripped copiously on the snow. The workmen crowded round him, watching him open and close his blood-stained fist, clicking their tongues, muttering in hoarse voices and pushing their dark faces against him like big dogs sniffing a strange puppy.

"It doesn't hurt," said Boris, screwing up his face and waving his hand.

"Here, I'll charm away the blood," said Markusha. Kneeling down, he crossed himself, assumed a ferocious attitude, and muttered menacingly over Boris's hand:

"Like water off a duck, like the devil's ill luck . . . here comes an old man as fast as he can, and a horse of grey. Stop! Go away! A curse on the horse! Take him by force! In the blue, blue sea, is a blue, blue stone. I pray to the stone—"

"Don't!" cried the child. "Let me go!"

But they paid no attention to him.

"That's a charm against axe-cuts, not against pricking yourself," objected grey-haired, red-eyed, sightless Ivan.

"Don't poke your nose in where it isn't wanted," said Markusha.

Kozhemyakin observed all this from where he was standing in the barn. At first he refrained from interfering, but when Boris cried out, he was frightened and took the child into the kitchen. The lodger came downstairs. This time she was upset and scolded her son as she washed his hand.

"It doesn't hurt, I was just frightened," he said uneasily.

"Frightened of what? You're not frightened of being naughty, are you?"

"No, listen, Mamma! He said such funny things—what was it he said, Uncle Matvei?"

"A charm to stop the blood," explained Kozhemyakin.

"Do you believe in charms?" asked the lodger without looking up.

"Why not? It *did* stop the blood, didn't it?"

"It was fright, not the charm that stopped the blood," said the woman tersely.

"They were like wild Indians, Mamma, and I was a white captive."

"Nonsense. You're an Indian yourself." She darted a resentful look in Matvei's direction and said menacingly: "I'd like to give that—er—charmer a talking-to."

Taking this as a repulse, Kozhemyakin shrugged his shoulders and went out of the kitchen. Through the half-open door he could hear the Tatar speaking in a high, wailing tone:

"You must not let him out there alone, Missy-Mamma! Ah, such bad things go on there! They say bad words, they like to see blood. You must not let him."

"You'd make a milksop of my son, Shakir. He must see everything."

"No, no, Missy-Mamma! He must not. He doesn't need that. And you don't need it and master doesn't need it. Good people don't need it. Good people need to fear it!"

The lodger gave a ringing laugh.

"No, Shakir, I disagree with you."

Kozhemyakin, who appreciated Shakir's fears, failed to appreciate her courage. He was irritated by it.

Just you wait, young lady, you'll learn to fear it! That pride of yours will wear off and then you'll be more meek and tractable! he said to himself.

Filled with a perverse desire to see her frightened, he called to mind all the quiet horror of Okurov life which this woman denied without knowing, scorned without having tasted.

He went over in his mind all the mocking jests and all the edifying speeches she had made, and he resented them. He admitted his inability to cope with those alien, incomprehensible aspects of her character that kept him from approaching her and which created an impalpable, but ever more noticeable barrier between them. He made persistent efforts to talk to her, but each time he floundered, could not understand what she said, and was ashamed to confess it.

It was as if when she spoke her words formed themselves into a tangle of loops in which he was inextricably caught. He saw only a vague, blurred vision of her handsome face through this tangle of words, which sounded as strange to him as if she were speaking foreign tongue.

One day he was made particularly conscious of the gulf separating her from everything familiar to him. He was sitting in the kitchen writing a letter, Shakir was balancing the accounts, Natalya was sewing and Markusha sitting on the floor by the stove whittling sticks and telling Boris about human fate.

Presently the door opened quietly and the lodger came in. She shook a warning finger at her son, who was lying at Markusha's feet, and sat down inconspicuously beside Natalya; sat down as though she had come to spy on someone.

"Well," Markusha was saying in his gruff voice, "so it turns out that a man's fate is born with him and it follows him all his life like his shadow. He turns right, it gives him a push to the left; he turns left, it gives him a push to the right; and on it goes, all his life long, pushing and twisting him about."

"What's it like, fate?" asked Boris thoughtfully.

"Fate? Different for different people. For some it's drink, for others it's getting drowned."

"But what does it *look* like?"

Kozhemyakin stopped writing and watched the lodger, who was listening attentively as she sat leaning against the wall, her head on one side, her lips tight, her eyes narrowed, her thin fingers playing with the fringe of her shawl.

"What does it look like?" repeated Markusha, wrinkling his forehead. "It looks like all sorts of things. Once a peasant on the Kama River saw it as a pike. He pulls out his net, and sees he's caught a smallish pike. He picks it up by the gills, and it starts pleading with him in a human voice: 'Let me go, Ivan, I'm your fate!' You can be sure he dropped it quick and took to his heels! Well, he was lucky enough to get away, but soon after that his wife starts ailing and in the fifth month she gives up the ghost."

"Why?" asked Boris with a cautious glance into the stove grate.

"Clear enough. Met her fate. Her doom."

"And the pike?"

"The pike just swam away. Fate takes all sorts of forms, my boy. Sometimes it's a hare, sometimes a dog or a cat. Or just a dead leaf. Here's what happened once in Voronezh: a woman was walking down the street in the rain with a north wind blowing, autumn it was. And the wind blows a dead leaf into her face and it sticks to her cheek. She picks it off and is about to throw it away when she hears

a voice whispering in her ear: 'You ought to put me inside your blouse and warm me, dearie. I'm your fate.' The woman's almost struck dumb with fright and starts running for all she's worth. When she gets home she finds her man and her two children have been poisoned by mushrooms. Well, they died, and she's been living like a leaf in the wind ever since; wherever it blows, there she goes."

He stopped talking and gave a long, wailing yawn. The shadow of his shaggy head fell on the flat white surface of the stove, and off his knee, in a steady silent stream, poured thin grey shavings.

Boris drew a deep breath.

"Is it beetles making that noise under the stove?" he asked.

"Maybe beetles, maybe mice," said Natalya.

"Or the hobgoblin," put in Markusha. "He loves to hide under the stove. That's his favourite spot."

The lodger stirred.

"Time to go to bed, Boris," she said.

"Not yet, Mummy. It's early yet."

"No, you must go," she said decisively.

The child got up, shook his head and surveyed the kitchen as if seeing it for the first time.

"Then you come too, Mummy," he said.

"No, I shall stay a little longer."

He went to the door reluctantly, opened it, peered into the passage and stepped slowly over the threshold.

"Somebody ought to go with him," said Natalya, putting down her sewing. "You go, Shakir."

The Tatar jumped up, but the lodger leaned forward and stopped him, saying sternly:

"Please stay where you are."

I wonder why? thought Kozhemyakin.

Aloud he said: "Perhaps the youngster's afraid."

"Afraid of what?" asked the lodger, throwing him a glance that might have been a challenge to battle.

"The dark," said Shakir with an engaging smile, and Markusha gave a snort and chuckled to himself.

"He knows it's always dark at night," said the lodger, looking at him out of the corner of her eye.

Everyone sat in silence, listening to the little feet clambering up the stairs and stumbling on the top step; they heard a door creak as it was opened, then heard it slammed.

"He's there," said Natalya with a sigh of relief. "I can imagine how his little heart must be beating!"

Kozhemyakin saw three pairs of eyes gazing at the lodger, two pairs reproachfully, one with malicious amusement. He felt sorry for her. Without approving of her behaviour, he admired her and thought, with a feeling akin to envy: She's got character!

Again she leaned back against the wall and said in a tone that was almost too loud and imperious:

"Tell us something else, Mark."

The porter's ears twitched and he raised his bearded eyeless face.

"My name's not Mark, but Yelisei, lady," he said gruffly. "They just call me that—Mark, Markusha—because my last name's Markov. My first is Yelisei, my patronymic's Petrovich. Yelisei Petrovich Markov, that's me."

She pulled her shawl closely round her and gave a little laugh.

"Very well, I'm glad you told me. Those fates you were talking about, Yelisei Petrovich, are they always evil?"

Markusha brushed the shavings off his knee, grunted, and again began pulling words, like shavings, out of his mouth.

"If you take her as she comes, she's not so bad, but if you show you can't abide her, she'll make you suffer."

"Have you ever seen your fate?"

"N-no. But there was a baker in Murom, he almost saw his. He tried and tried, but nothing came of it. And then he happened to learn a secret charm out of the Black

Book. He went to the cross-roads in the woods, took the cross off his neck, and said the charm. He said it once, twice—nothing happened. Just as he was saying it the third time he hears a voice howling in the woods: 'Oo-ee!' He was a brave fellow; he broke out in a sweat and shook all over, but he went on saying the charm, and when he got to the end, the very last word—there she was, crawling up to him, moaning and groaning for all she was worth, and then he turned tail and ran as fast as his legs'd carry him. And from that day on, lady, his heart's been twisting and turning inside him."

"Do you believe in God?" asked the lodger suddenly, leaning forward.

Shakir and Natalya exchanged glances and Kozhemyakin started as if someone had stuck a pin in him.

Markusha shook his head and blew into the air as if chasing a fly away.

"Even the beasts of the fields pray to God, lady. Look, when there's a full moon the dogs howl. What's that? And when the sun shines bright a dog can't lift its eyes to heaven but keeps them on the earth, being as it's an earthy beast, but when the moon's up it raises its eyes—"

"Wait," interrupted the lodger. "I asked you if you believed in God."

He lifted his head ponderously and stared at her from under his bushy brows.

"Am I worse than a dog?" he said.

"And God is all-powerful?"

"So what of it?"

"Then what is fate?" she asked. "Where does this 'doom' of yours come in?"

Markusha gave a little snort, wagged his head and bent over his work again.

"Fate?" he said in his flat voice. "Fate's from God, too. All things come from God. A person's born—you, for instance—and as soon as you're born God calls an ar-

changel and says to him: 'Here, give her a fate.' So he gives you one and writes it down, as the saying goes: 'It was writ against him at his birth.' There's no getting away from fate, lady."

He's purposely talking in that dismal tone to make her angry, thought Matvei. She would do better to drop the subject.

"So that's fate for you, lady. And it's not only people that have their fates. Towns and villages do, too. One town's fated to be built at the foot of a hill, another to be built in the woods."

"But then," she put in gently, "God ought to–"

But Markusha did not let her finish her sentence.

"What He ought to do is none of our business. It's given us to know just so much and no more. We'll learn the rest when we die."

Bending over so that she spoke right into his ear, she persisted:

"Do you know what guardian angels are?"

"Angels? Of course I do," said he with a nod. "Angels, they're for pious pilgrims, for them that are caught by religion, the mad seers—it's the angels' job to watch over them, and that's why they can go barefoot in the dead of winter and nothing happens to them. Once they're called guardian angels, that means their job is to guard, that means God needs the folk whom they're sent to watch over."

"And what about fate?"

"Fate's got a different job. Her job is to test people. Here you are, born into the world—what sort will you turn out to be? Here's your fate; let's see how you take it."

Kozhemyakin saw that the lodger was annoyed. Her eyebrows were drawn into a single straight line and little shadows flickered over her face. He felt she had difficulty in remaining seated, as if some force were lifting her out of the chair. He gave a little cough and observed in a conciliatory tone:

"You must find our beliefs rather queer."

"Are they your beliefs too?" she asked very deliberately.

He was not sure they were, but, taken off his guard, he could only say:

"Oh, I suppose so."

"And you believe in fate?"

"Everybody believes in fate," put in Natalya, stealing a glance at Shakir. "They even sing songs about fate."

The lodger put her hand on Natalya's shoulder, evidently wishing to say something to her, but Markusha proceeded with the same obstinacy she herself had shown.

"There's two words that fight together, lady," he said in a new tone. "God says, 'You're fated.' The devil says, 'You're free.' He whispers that in our ears to set us on the wrong track. So it all depends on what a man hears. The devil's word falls into the hearts of some, and then they begin to think: I'm free to do whatever I like. And so they either do some big foolishness, or go off and join a robber band."

Markusha's face wrinkled up, his beard stood on end like the bristles of a porcupine and two deep lines ran from the corners of his mouth to his ears. He shook his head.

He's laughing, damn him, said Matvei to himself.

"Then there was that fellow who came to where I lived in Kuligi—that's in the Ryazan district," went on Markusha, sending his shaggy little words crawling about the kitchen. "Fyodor Natruskin was the fellow's name; thought himself a wise one, he did; lived in Moscow and got himself sent out of Moscow for inventing a new faith. Well, he comes to us in Kuligi and says this isn't right, and that isn't right, and the other's not right. Says it to everybody, even to the priest. Who knows what's godly or ungodly? That's a thing that can only be guessed at. For a time the peasants listened to him and grinned. But one day they caught a horse thief and set on him with their fists and Natruskin comes running up and shouts: 'Stop! You mustn't!' So they fall on him, too, and beat him with a pole or something—never did find

out what—and killed him. And there you are. He thinks 'I'm free,' but his fate lays him low. And it's always like that, lady. The free ones are short-lived. But if you take your fate as it comes, you can go on living in peace and quiet. No sense in taking a stand against the wind; you can never tell what it'll blow in your direction. That's how it was with a certain merchant of my acquaintance—"

The woman suddenly lunged forward as if throwing herself upon Markusha and held out her hand.

"It's ruin to believe such things," she said in a deep and gentle voice. "And you are much too clever to. They fetter your soul and befuddle your mind, befuddle it terribly."

Kozhemyakin, too, leaned forward, stretched his arm across the table, and, closing his fingers tightly on the further edge, half-closed his eyes and smiled in anticipation of what was to come.

He had never liked this talkative know-all who was like a wizard. He had never liked him, yet he stood in awe of him, almost feared him. There was something cunning, underhand and dishonest in Markusha's broad face with its rough beard, spreading nose and the grin that stretched from ear to ear; but there was something compelling in his slits of eyes, something that cowed Matvei. Markusha was a poor and lazy workman. The only thing he did well was to make bird-cages, which he sold to the nuns or in the market, hiding away the money nobody knew where.

Shakir had more than once suggested that he should be dismissed as a shiftless workman, but Matvei could not bring himself to do it.

"Oh, leave him alone," he always said. "He won't eat us out of house and home, and if we get rid of him he may vent his spite on us in a nasty way."

There was another reason for not getting rid of Markusha: his stories about the mysterious, irresistible forces that govern people's lives fitted in with everything Matvei had experienced and come to know, all that he brooded on in the

darkness of night. They cemented the past into a strong unit, a high, encircling grey wall to which each new day was added like a new brick. His stories acted as a narcotic to one who occasionally lifted his head and tried to glimpse something beyond the dull boredom of the morrow.

And here was the lodger annihilating, as it were, the dark silhouette of Markusha's head on the stove with a single wave of her graceful hand.

Matvei followed closely the play of expression on her face which was lit by the kindly glow of her eyes. He noticed the sensitive quivering of her lips and listened to the gentle intonations of the voice issuing in a rich stream from the depths of her chest, bringing a message that was new to him and inspired by unwavering faith. At first she spoke about simple, comprehensible things; about Christ, a single God and the Gospels with which Matvei had long been familiar.

But soon her speech became flecked with dark spots of unknown words that made gaps in the comprehensible; before he was able to guess at the meaning of such a word, she had gone on, leaving him wondering what the connection was between what she was saying now and what she had said a moment before.

Don't hurry! he said to her in his mind, ashamed to say it aloud.

"This is all more ancient and has nothing to do with Christianity," she was saying gently, like a mother to a child, "the thing is that we Slavs . . ."

Slavs? thought Kozhemyakin.

". . . a religious cult. . . ."

Cult? He repeated the strange word to himself, puzzled and annoyed. Meanwhile his ears were assaulted by other new words: culture, legends, mysticism. There were more and more of them; they enveloped Yevgenia Petrovna in a sort of haze that dimmed her features and made her strange and inaccessible.

With a sigh he glanced about him. Natalya, dozing off,

had pricked her finger with her needle, and now, wide-eyed, was noisily sucking the blood and spitting it out. Shakir was bent over the table scratching at a piece of paper with a rusty pen. Markusha's knife-blade flashed ceaselessly as he produced rings and crescents of shavings.

Suddenly the lodger's voice snapped like an over-taut string. She got up, cast a look on all those sitting there, and said in a low, apologetic tone:

"But I don't suppose this interests you."

Matvei dropped his eyes uncomfortably and was about to say that she spoke so quickly it was hard to catch her meaning, when Natalya replied blandly:

"Doesn't interest us? How can you say such a thing, Yevgenia Petrovna? Of course it interests us!"

"Our Koran says the same thing," observed Shakir with grave approval as he shook his stiff fingers to get back the circulation.

"Thank you, Shakir," smiled the lodger. With an adroit movement she adjusted the shawl that had slipped off her shoulders, and then, sighing, made for the door.

"Ah, well. Good-night."

Kozhemyakin was afraid she was offended. Markusha cautiously straightened up, raised his head and stretched his mouth from ear to ear.

"Not a grain of it did she pick up, hee-hee!" he chuckled. "All the truths I hung in her ears, but she couldn't grasp them. Bless me! All the people there are on this earth of ours, and what's the good of them?"

Matvei got up and said roughly:

"Nobody, it seems, understands. She's not the only one."

"Just what I said!"

Shakir looked at Markusha and grinned.

"You try to frighten people; she talks about God, but not to frighten people."

"She's too young," replied Markusha. "Everybody's brave when they're young. She'll be afraid too when she's older."

Matvei recalled what she had said about Christ when she had first begun to speak. It had been as though she had known the living Christ and walked with him on earth, so simply and intimately had she spoken of him.

He went into his own room, took up the Bible, and read over and over again the passages she had mentioned, and to his surprise he found that Christ really was simpler and more understandable than he had ever thought. And at the same time He was more removed from the life Matvei knew, as if a vast, impenetrable wilderness stood between Him and the town of Okurov.

And so it is with everything she says, he mused sadly. Clear and simple, and yet, far, far away.

He could not sleep that night. The unfamiliar words echoed in his mind and knocked at his heart like freezing birds tapping on the window-pane, while in his mind's eye rose the vision of the woman's kind face. Outside the wind soughed, the snow fell thudding off trees and roof, and water dripped, as if marking the passage of the minutes. There was a thaw that night.

Strange dreams came to him when at last he fell asleep. He saw grey cloud shadows scudding over the fields and bare hills, moaning as they went:

"Slavs! Slavs!"

He saw Markusha hung about with bird-cages, grinning and muttering:

"Just what I said!"

On one of the hills, stripped of snow and cut into bleeding fissures by the wind, someone was lying and crying out:

"It isn't so! It isn't so!"

The cocks began to crow and the jackdaws to caw. The monastery bell called people to matins in a thin, hesitant voice.

Matvei lay with closed eyes for another half-hour or so, then he went barefoot to the window and gazed out for a long time at the slowly dissolving gloom of early morning.

Shall I go to matins? he asked himself. For some reason he remembered how, three years before, Natalya had thrust a note into his hand and smiled slyly as she whispered:

"A little present, Matvei Savelyevich!"

He had opened the note and read the florid writing:

"If you can keep a secret, come at eleven o'clock tonight to the bird-cherry bush beside the convent wall. You will learn something very important."

The nuns up to their mischief, he had concluded without surprise.

The whole town knew that such things went on in the convent. Once when the district police officer was in his cups he had boasted that he knew a nun whose breasts did not match: one of them weighed five pounds, the other six and a quarter. But—"without sin there can be no repentance and without repentance there can be no salvation." The nuns' escapades were their own affair, their prayers were for the whole world.

He had gone to the tryst reluctantly, more from curiosity than desire, and when he reached the place he lay down on the warm earth and looked through a chink in the wall. It was a moonlit night and a somnolent stillness lay upon the shadow-laced convent garden. Suddenly one of the shadows stirred, there was a crunching of gravel and something black came swaying towards the wall. He instantly guessed from the height and walk that it was Raisa, a middle-aged woman given to drink whose task it was to offer hospitality to pilgrims stopping at the convent. He remembered that her eyes, small and sunk in fat, would peer at him sweetly whenever he met her, and a smile would spread over her face like butter on a hot pancake. The memory made him feel bitter and ashamed.

He pretended not to hear her sigh and clear her throat. Lacking the courage to get up and go away, he remained lying on the ground till morning, lying so still that at dawn a timid little bird alighted on a stalk that almost touched his face.

Only on catching sight of his wide-open eyes did the tiny creature dart away and hide among the roots of some weeds.

He also remembered that Bobikha, the town matchmaker, had tried to give him girls nobody else wanted: some squinted, others lisped or were lame, and one of them had an illegitimate child as her dowry.

"Why do you offer me such girls?" he had asked Bobikha.

"What kind would you like?"

"Normal ones."

"The goods are chosen to match the buyer," answered the insolent old woman with a wink. "Do you think the townsfolk have forgotten about your stepmother? Oh, no! They've got good memories, they have!" And she shook all over with silent laughter.

He stood at the window until everyone else in the house was up, when he washed himself hurriedly, dressed, went to the kitchen and stood in the doorway. Markusha was sitting at the table holding Boris between his knees.

"So I'm a pagan, am I? Oh, yes, she's a fine one to call people names. A pagan. Hm. Yes, my boy, I know charms for all sorts of things, so you'd better look out! You ask her, for instance, how to get rid of warts. Look, there's a wart on your hand."

Kozhemyakin stepped into the kitchen and to his own surprise said sternly:

"Don't fill the child's head with your nonsense."

He was pleased with himself for having said it.

Boris, clean and pink and charming, raised his eyebrows and greeted him affectionately:

"Good-morning."

Matvei shook hands with him.

"I hope you slept well," he said.

"I did, thank you," replied the child, clicking his heels together politely.

Matvei laughed with pleasure and snatched the child up in his arms.

"Let's be friends, shall we?" he said.

"Let's," said Boris. He patted Matvei's head and said, "How soft your hair is! Softer than Mamma's."

"Oh, come!"

"Really and truly."

"That's nice."

"Why?"

Why indeed? Matvei was at a loss. What a strange little imp he is! he thought as he put the child down.

"Have you had breakfast?" he asked.

"No. Mamma isn't dressed yet."

"Isn't dressed?" He closed his eyes for a second. "Then let's have breakfast together, you and me. We'll ask Natalya to make us some pancakes, shall we?"

"Let's."

Their friendship grew during breakfast. The child gave the man an animated account of Robinson Crusoe, and the man listened to the marvellous tale with childlike absorption.

"Will you give me that book to read?" he said when it was over.

He chanced to meet the lodger later in the day.

"That son of yours is very amusing," he said to her. "And very clever."

"I'm glad to hear it," she said with an amiable smile.

The smile gave him courage.

"And more kind-hearted than his mother."

The woman frowned and went past him, throwing over her shoulder:

"I'm not a child."

Why should she have said that? thought Matvei with a grimace. Does she take me for a child?

With rancour in his heart, he went out to the rope works.

He realized clearly that for this woman Markusha was of more interest than Markusha's master. After that first discussion she came to the kitchen more often and even

sought out the yard porter in the day-time and talked to him in his off hours. The old man's eyes receded even more deeply into their sockets, he shook his shaggy head and muttered menacingly.

Why should she want to be with him? wondered Matvei. She avoids me, and yet—

On a quiet winter's evening she came to him in a gay mood. She was wearing a red waist with a stand-up collar that buttoned on the side like a man's Russian blouse, a black skirt and a misty scarf that reminded him of an autumn cloud. She had wound her plait round her head like a crown, and this made her look even taller.

"I've come to ask a great favour," she said, taking a seat by the tiled stove in a corner of the room.

The red waist made him giddy and he could hardly distinguish her face against the background of the white tiles.

She said she was obliged to earn some money and had found work: she was to tutor the daughter of the town treasurer Matushkin and the grandson of the merchant Khryapov.

"Ah, Vanya," murmured Kozhemyakin, feeling that he ought to say something. "His mother and father were drowned when a steamboat caught fire and sank."

"But I've been forbidden to teach children, and so nobody must hear of it."

"They won't!" said Matvei vehemently, but he broke into a sweat as he thought to himself: Of course they will!

A bright idea came to him.

You must pretend you're not teaching them; that they just come here to play with Boris."

"Of course I will," she said brightly. "And there's one other thing: would you allow me to teach them here, in your rooms?"

He was so delighted that he leaped out of his chair and fairly shouted:

"As often as you like!"

"Three times a week for an hour? Won't it be putting you out?"

"Me?"

Her brows quivered and she frowned, but the next minute she gave a carefree laugh.

"Oh, I know they're sure to find out and make me stop, but I must keep it up as long as I can. Thank you."

She gave his hand a firm squeeze and went out, leaving behind her a heady fragrance. Matvei walked excitedly about the room, wiped the sweat off his brow, and said to himself:

Find out, will they? I'll bribe them: here, go and swill to your heart's content! Or I'll appeal to Father Vitaly. At last, darling. . . .

Never before had he dared to address a term of endearment to her even in imagination. He looked about him in fear and raised a hand as if to clap it over his mouth. In the looking-glass he caught sight of a big, stout man with a beard, with longish hair clipped in a straight line round his head, a short jacket and mauve blouse. There he stood in the middle of the room, sweating, red-faced and smiling in a foolish self-conscious way.

"A fine fellow, you are!" he murmured scathingly as he turned to the window and gazed at the blue shadows in the garden.

The log walls of the house creaked as the frost pinched them and Matvei's heart tingled with the joyous anticipation of something that was bound to happen soon; something it was shameful and terrifying to dwell on in his mind.

A man wouldn't dare put his arms round a woman like that, he said to himself with a rueful little smile. Retiring into a shadowy corner, he offered up a prayer: Holy Virgin, be merciful and deliver me from this temptation!

Twice there had been a wet spring snow-fall: "Grandson has come to fetch Grandad," as the saying goes. Houses and

trees wore fluffy coats of snow, the pale but strong sun of March painted rainbows on the icicles, the windows of the houses gazed up into the blue sky like the healed eyes of the blind, crows and daws mended their nests, larks sang over the thawing fields, and Markusha and Boris went out to trap them with bits of looking-glass.

Kozhemyakin read *Robinson Crusoe*, *Rodnoye Slovo*, *The Children's World*, and five or six other books. In this way his friendship with the lodger's son was strengthened.

She continued to smile at him gently, fleetingly, and to pass him by, always courteous and reserved. Three times a week Kozhemyakin would tiptoe up to the partition separating his room from the one in which Pelageya had died, put his ear to the thin boards, and listen to the lodger teaching blue-eyed, curly-haired Lyuba and awkward, broad-faced Vanya.

He could hear everything, the boards scarcely deadened the sounds, especially since he had widened the cracks by slipping the blade of an axe between them.

After the lesson the lodger usually read to the children or told them a story, astounding him by the extent of her knowledge. Or she would ask her pupils to tell her how they had spent their day.

"Here's how to catch larks," said Boris: "If you put the looking-glass on the ground so that the lark sees himself in it, the silly thing takes it for the sky and goes plunging down into it, thinking he's flying up instead of down. Larks are awfully stupid."

"No more stupid than you," said his mother, and launched into an absorbing description of the life of larks.

She knows everything! marvelled Matvei. Her erudition inspired respect in him, but it frightened away his dreams and cooled his incipient desire, while drawing him to her all the more irresistibly.

One day he heard her recite the following poem in a rich and sorrowful voice:

Dark and dreary is my prison cell,
Padded with mould and infested with rats,
From the low-hanging arches the water drips,
While the world outside is buoyant with spring.
A heap of ill-smelling straw is my bed,
I share it with vermin and creeping things,
And yet from the tower the view, I know,
Is of far-flung fields and purple hills.
A moan of despair bursts from my breast
And dies, unheard, in the stagnant air;
Dull is the clank of my chains as I move,
While from over the hills comes the song of a bird.

On seeing her in the kitchen that evening, he said:

"As I was passing the door today, I heard you reciting a poem. Would you give it to me?"

"I can't. I recited it by heart; I haven't the book."

"Then perhaps you'll write it down?"

"Yes. Did you like it?"

"Very much."

"It was written by Shcherbina," she said slowly. "At one time I was very fond of him; long, long ago."

"Write it out for me and I'll copy it into my notebook."

She darted an enquiring look at him.

"Your notebook?" she laughed. "Perhaps you write poetry yourself?"

"Oh, no. I just write down things to pass the time of day," he admitted.

"Really?" she said, and he fancied that her eyes grew bigger. "That's interesting. Won't you show it to me?"

Her voice was unusually friendly, she had never spoken to him like that before; it encouraged him to say with new confidence:

"I wouldn't like to do that, there are all sorts of things in it, but if you'll come and see me some time when you're free, I'll choose a piece to read to you."

The woman gazed past him, silent and thoughtful, while he hung upon her eyes and felt his heart growing cold, fearful of her answer.

"Very well, I will," she said with sudden decision, straightening up. "When?"

"This very minute if you like."

"Dear me, you writers!" she laughed softly; then, in a different voice, almost crossly, "How old are you?"

"Thirty-one-two-"

"Impossible! You're fifteen," she said in yet another tone.

Matvei gave a start.

Can she be flirting with me? he thought.

She went to the door and turned back to say brusquely: "I'll come in an hour."

He ordered Natalya to heat the samovar, rushed into his room, snatched two fat notebooks from the bookcase, threw them on the table, and decided he must dress himself for the occasion.

At last one of the longest hours of his life came to an end. Natalya, smiling significantly and casting sidelong glances at her master, had put the boiling samovar on the table and Matvei had taken a seat in front of it. He was wearing a dark blue cashmere blouse embroidered by the nuns in gold thread, and wide trousers of French velveteen. With great difficulty he had drawn on a pair of new patent-leather boots and had soaked his hair with brilliantine. He thought of wearing his father's big gold watch, but it did not fit into the pocket of his blouse and it was too hot in the room to put on a waistcoat. There he sat without stirring, trying not to see the distorted reflection of his face in the brass samovar, and listening intently for the sound of her firm step on the stairs.

Seventeen minutes—eighteen—he counted, staring unhappily at the yellow face of the clock on the wall, as big and round and sinister as a rising moon.

The high tight collar of the blouse choked him, the boots pinched his toes and squeaked whenever he moved.

When twenty-two minutes had gone by she opened the door. He got up and bowed.

She came noiselessly over to the table, swept him from head to foot with her eyes, and said:

"Why have you got yourself up like a coachman?"

Matvei sat down.

"But you, too . . . in your red waist . . ." he murmured defensively.

"What about it?"

"I don't know," said Kozhemyakin glumly.

"Neither do I," said she.

Suddenly she dropped into a chair and burst out laughing, throwing back her head and gasping between paroxysms:

"Forgive me—but you're so funny—so awfully funny—really you are—"

He was delighted. He rocked to and fro with his mouth wide open, patting his velveteen knees, echoing her laughter in a deep bass voice.

"You *are* quaint," she said, wiping away the tears. There was a sad look in her gentle eyes.

He poured her out a cup of tea with a trembling hand.

"A savage, that's what I am. Everybody here's a savage—and especially me, I suppose. Living like this, all by myself—"

The line appeared between her eyebrows.

"I'll pour out the tea and you shall read," she said in a matter-of-fact tone. Matvei noticed the change in her face and voice. He got up; his boots squeaked unmercifully. A great bitterness welled up in his heart and he lowered his eyes.

"And I'm stupid as well," he said.

"Why should you say such a thing?" she said quietly, after a little pause.

"You can see for yourself. I wanted everything to be nice—for your sake—and it turned out to be funny."

With an impulsive movement he unfastened the two buttons of his collar, sat down at the table, and opened his notebook.

"Read," she said in a placating tone.

He cleared his throat, read the "Ode to Venus," and glanced at his guest.

"The verse is horribly old-fashioned," she said with a smile, "and you read it as if you were dying."

"It's the best I can do," he said.

"Read simply, as you would talk," she said.

He fancied there were two women here: one good and kind, who made him feel happy and at ease, the other mocking and imperious.

"Here's another poem:"

Mortal, awake, and perfect thyself!
Thou hast a calling high!
Do thy good works e'er comes the night,
And prepare thyself to die!

"Very bright and cheerful," she commented.

Kozhemyakin drew a deep breath and went on:

And darest thou philosophize
When great minds grope in vain?
To labour are we born, to err,
And to rejoice in pain.

"Wherever did you unearth such wisdom?" she asked with a shrug of her shoulders.

"I bought some brass fittings for the windows and the screws were wrapped up in this poem," he said reluctantly.

"Why do you like it?"

"The meaning of it," he said defensively. "Who here would ever have such thoughts?"

"Oh, you think so?" she laughed. "I'm afraid such sentiments won't help you to—how was it put?—'perfect yourself.'"

I'll not bend before her like a clothes-hook, said Matvei to himself, and he turned over several pages at once and began to read again in the same monotonous voice, pronouncing each word slowly:

"On the day before yesterday, May 21, 1875, Petukhov Hill was almost wiped out by fire, nineteen houses were burnt down, they say cobbler Setunov, the one who used to make fun of me, set fire to his neighbour's house out of spite, but I don't believe it. Yesterday morning they caught him amongst the ashes of his own house while he was trying to collect the metal parts of his stove, they took him to police headquarters and during the night he died."

"Did they beat him?" she asked.

"I don't know. Probably," said the chronicler without looking up. "Beatings come cheap here."

"Why did he make fun of you?"

"Oh, because he was old and ailing, I suppose, and I was young. Here's another of the same year, August 2nd:

"Fitter Koptyev's wife gave him arsenic; a week ago when he was drunk he slit her mouth to the ear and slashed her winter-coat and silk sarafan handed down to her from her mother; they took her to jail, and when they got to the market-place she stripped naked, being more or less out of her mind—"

"I won't read the rest if you don't mind—it's not quite fitting."

"Why have you written all that down?" she asked quietly.

"I don't know." Then after a moment's consideration: "I only write down the most important things. Here, this is interesting:

"'Same year, September 20th.

"'The Maklakovs are in trouble: Fyodor's uncle killed Tiunova, the woman healer. While she was treating him for *'the duck'* she dropped the axe on his back because she was drunk or perhaps due to old age, anyway, he jumped up and seized her by the hair and knocked her head against the door-post, her skull split open and she died on the spot. There are rumours of a trial, but the Maklakovs are rich and everybody knows Tiunova was a hard drinker, most likely it will all pass over; they will say the old lady had a stroke.'"

The lodger drew her chair closer. He glanced up at her and was frightened: her face was drawn as if with pain and her eyes were big and dark.

"I don't understand," she said with a wry smile. "What is *'the duck'* and why had she an axe?"

So you don't know everything! said Matvei to himself.

"The axe is an old-fashioned cure—," he began.

"An axe, a cure?" she said. "How extraordinary! And *'the duck'?*"

"That's what it's called when you've got a pain in the small of your back. A poker is needed, too. The sick person lies down in the doorway, a poker is put on his back, and the poker is struck by an axe—not too hard—three times three. At every third blow the sick person has to ask: 'What are you hitting?' and the healer says: 'I'm hitting the duck,' and then the sick person has to recite the charm: 'Strike the duck harder, strike the duck faster; scatter the duck, poker, along the twelve roads; along the twelve roads to the dark abodes, and put him in a sack so that he'll never come back. Praskovaya the Holy, take pity on

my aching bones!' After that the poker is thrown under the gate, and it's a good omen if a cat sniffs it at dawn."

The woman straightened up and glanced about the room.

"Would you—er—like something?" asked Matvei uneasily.

"No, thank you."

"Perhaps you've had enough of my reading?"

"No. Tell me, isn't there a doctor in this town?"

"There is. An old army doctor. He's a good doctor, but he drinks."

"Go on reading," she said, bending her head.

" 'Same year, October 6th:

" 'Today they buried an actress from the company that plays in the fire-station shed when they get a permit. She died three days ago from loss of blood, nobody knows why, but the gossips say from a beating. She was alive on the first; I saw her. She played the part of a gentlewoman, the piece was dull until they got to the place where a soldier in a pasteboard helmet seized her by the hair and stabbed her with a knife. They say the man who played the soldier was her husband. It was a very wild scene, and she was tall and thin and had a hoarse voice. During the performance Bazunov made everybody laugh by calling out: 'Hey, stop coughing, lady, I hear that every day of my life without having to pay for it!' (His daughter-in-law has got consumption. Two firemen and two of her companions carried her coffin past our house, the man supposed to be her husband walked behind with a policeman, he was drunk and the tears were streaming down his cheeks and he kept bawling 'Eternal Rest' at the top of his voice, the policeman tried to make him behave himself but he couldn't; they didn't allow him into the graveyard, she was buried off in the corner where Klucharev and the likes of him are buried.' "

"That's all."

"It was a very good idea to write down all of these things," said the lodger thoughtfully. "A very good idea."

"Why?" he asked. "Sometimes when I read them over I think how dull they are."

"Dull? And nothing else?"

What does she mean, I wonder? thought Matvei, but he began reading the next entry without asking.

"'April 29, 1876.

"'Yesterday a clerk named Bystretsov caught an unknown fellow in the market-place, he was put in jail, but he ran away during the night, and today they have been searching for him on foot and on horseback since early morning. They gave a beating to one of the passers-by, but he turned out not to be the man they were looking for. Bazunov said the man who escaped from prison had been sent by the Poles to set fire to government forest lands, he said they found incendiary papers on him. It is hard to imagine how he ever ran away, because when they caught him in the market-place they wrenched one of his arms out of the socket. Tolokonnikov bragged that he had done it and I believe him because he is a real brute.'"

The woman drew one hand across her face, sank back in her chair and folded her arms.

"Did they ever find him?" she asked.

"No. Are you bored?"

"Go on," she said, closing her eyes.

Kozhemyakin bent over his notebook.

"All the rest, up to 1879, is mostly about household affairs: for instance, how they gave Shakir a drubbing because of Natalya—"

"Who did?"

"The townsfolk. And then there are some thoughts about the workmen—"

"Whose thoughts?"

"Mine. And again about the house, and then about me—shall I leave that out?"

"Just as you like," she said with a sigh, pulling her shawl tighter about her shoulders despite the heat in the room.

I wish I'd never begun this, thought Matvei dismally as he looked at her drawn face and the dark circles under her eyes. He went on talking and listening to the dull drone of his own voice as he leafed through the pages:

"Here's about finishing the new church and the dedication ceremony, one of the plasterers got drunk, but that's not interesting. Here's about how three fighters from the artisans' settlement got killed because the men they fought with had weights in their fists, and how a wolf got into the Vattins' yard and killed their dog, and then some foolish entries: Tailor Sinukhin bit off his sister-in-law's nose and somebody smeared the Kalistratovs' gate with tar by mistake. Then there's this about the new bell: they tried it out just before they were going to hoist it into the belfry of the new church (it weighed six hundred and twenty poods) and it cracked. They didn't hang it until 1882, on the eve of Assumption Day. And then about fires, of course. There are fires every year; it's not interesting even to watch them, let alone write about them. Some little boys tried to stamp down the ice on the river when it swelled up in the spring, seven of them fell through, three of them were drowned and one of them, Savateika Pushkaryov (I was his guardian), died of pneumonia. A woman named Sekleteya Dobychina went to the woods to gather mushrooms and never came back. Some say she was drowned in a bog, others that she went to take the veil in the Chernoborsky Convent. It seems she had got herself into trouble with Father Vitaly of the St. Nikola Church—"

As he intoned all this in the voice of a deacon reading the liturgy, the lodger got up and went to the window, where she stood enveloped in twilight shadow.

What makes her so restless? thought Matvei, glancing at

her out of the corner of his eye and feeling more and more uncomfortable in her presence.

"And then there's this," he said making a great effort to read in a lively voice:

"'June 3, 1879.

"'They put a live mermaid on exhibition in the marketplace, she was caught in the Tigris River, the upper half of her was a woman, the lower half a fish, and they kept her in something like a wash-tub, and when the man who owned her would ask her what her name was and where she came from she always answered: 'Sarah from Sahara.' Her bare shoulders were covered with pimples, just like a human being's. Lots of people thought she was a fake, and old Bazunov shouted that Sahara was not on the Tigris, and that the Tigris had dried up long ago, but the mermaid's owner said Sahara meant Samaria, the place it speaks about in the Bible, where the woman with seven husbands talked to Christ at the well. Bazunov was put to shame, he just shook his fist at the man and walked away, he had never been put in his place like that before and most people felt sorry for him, but some of them were glad to see him worsted. Old Bazunov is over ninety years old. In this same show there was a basin of water and people threw silver coins into it—one- or two-kopek pieces—and when they tried to fish them out again they were unable to, some magic force pushed their hands away and gave them cramp in their fingers. The owner sold the water for ten kopeks a bottle, he said it cured fevers.'"

"Have you written down anything about the war?" asked the lodger.

It seemed to Kozhemyakin that she was crying, he was frightened and hastened to say:

"The war? Just a second. It's not exactly about the war, but about a Turk. Here:

"The mistress of the Voyevodin estate has brought back a Turkish prisoner and all the townsfolk go across the river to see him, and I went too. He's tall, with a brown face, a big head and whiskers, he was dressed in Russian clothes, not a uniform, a brown coat and black trousers, and on his head he had a red cap like a flowerpot. He smiles in a guilty sort of way, not at all ferocious. He went for a walk with the Voyevodin woman on the hills beyond the settlement, she's fat and only comes up to his shoulder and she's got bulging eyes but there's a kindly look in them, her voice sounded husky when she laughed. The Turk carries a stick and drags his right foot, I suppose he was wounded. Nasty rumours are being spread about her in the town, and Bazunov says he is going to complain to the governor; he says if nothing is done about it Turkish blood may get mixed with ours and start a Turkish tribe. As it is he says our gentry have no more than about seven drops of Russian blood left in them."

"And then there's this on the same subject:

" 'October 29th.

" 'Father Vitaly told me that the Voyevodin woman was taken to Vorgorod dying of a Turkish disease called *goitre.* People's eyes pop out from this disease and they are sure to die because there is no cure for it. Father Vitaly said: "Just look what a woman's lust will bring her to!" ' "

I hope she doesn't take offence! thought Matvei, glancing up at his guest. She was standing near the stove with head bent and hands crossed on her breast.

"Here," he said quickly, "I've written that we took Plevna, but I was in the Voyevodin's village at the time and nothing important happened except that in the market-place they tarred a man from the steppe.

" 'June 5, 1880.

" 'Clerk Bystretsov has met with misfortune: his brother, an officer, came to visit him and died unexpectedly and they forgot to throw the 'dead soap' out on the cross-road—' "

"What kind of soap?" asked the lodger in a voice as soft as a sigh.

"'Dead soap.' The soap they wash the corpse with," he explained. "It's harmful. You're supposed to throw it to the four winds, but Bystretsov forgot to, and his wife must have washed herself with it, because she broke out in sores —the French disease, begging your pardon. Her husband beat her for it. A shame, she's so young and pretty—"

"Merciful heavens!" breathed the lodger, coming up to the table as noiselessly as if walking on air. "What a dreadful chronicle! Don't you find it so?"

He was perplexed and frightened by her agitation.

"Not dreadful," he said in a tone that was almost apologetic. "Not dreadful, but boring. There are no words to express how boring it is."

That's a lie, he said to himself. A lie, because of course it is dreadful.

"You can't mean that," she said as if she had read his thoughts. "Read me your entries for 1881."

There you are! he exclaimed inwardly. I should never have started this. I hoped to win her over by showing her my notebook, and instead I've just put a heap of rubbish between us. And now this!

He lowered his voice and read quickly and incoherently:

" 'March 5, 1881.

" 'The tsar was assassinated in St. Petersburg, the nobles are blamed for it, but no one is allowed to speak about it. The police officer struck Bazunov in the chest and threatened to put him in jail when he blamed the nobles, and

Bazunov's old and well known, and they arrested Kukishev, the shopkeeper; he was the first to blame them. There were lots of unsuccessful attempts to kill the tsar, and now at last they have killed him with a bomb, nobody can understand why they should have done such a thing.' "

He stopped reading.

"Is that all?" asked the lodger.

He fancied there was a note of fear as well as indignation in her voice. Once more she came over to the table with the slow, unsteady walk of the blind. Her face was drawn and her wide eyes glittered like a cat's.

"Yes, that's all," he said in a loud voice, hoping thereby to shake off the perplexity that hung so heavily upon him.

Wearily, awkwardly, she sank down on the edge of a chair and gave a rueful smile.

"Did people cry? Did they seem—sorry?" she asked in a strange voice.

"I can't say. The old women cried, but then they always do, no matter who dies."

"But he did so much good for the people!"she exclaimed locking her fingers so tightly that the bones cracked. "Didn't you know that?"

So she took no part in it! concluded Matvei in a sudden access of joy. Thank God for that!

"I know so little," he said, leaning towards her and speaking as gently and confidentially as he could. "Perhaps some people felt sorry, but I see so few—"

"Why is that?" she asked, gazing steadily into his eyes.

"I don't know. I don't know how to get on with people —and to tell you the truth, there's nobody I'd like to get on with. As soon as you show a person the least friendship, he's sure to deceive you or hurt you."

She got up again and began walking up and down. Her shawl slipped off her shoulder and trailed along the floor.

"But surely you remember some of the things people said about him?"

"They didn't say anything in particular; just wondered who could have killed him and why. And everybody agreed it must have been the nobles. It caused a lot of excitement—nothing of the sort had ever happened before."

"Never happened before!" she exclaimed softly.

"He never came to our town, of course; people only knew him from pictures and calendars. And not everybody has pictures and calendars. We live so far away."

"Did they talk about it for a long time?"

"I don't think so. Things are quickly forgotten here. Everybody has his own life, his own interests—"

He stopped and contemplated her tall form a little while before he said:

"If you're not tired I'll tell you just how it happened."

She turned quickly.

"Please do; oh, please!"

She must have been fond of him, he thought.

And he began to tell her about that dreadful evening, just as he had recalled it not so long before; and while he spoke the woman paced noiselessly to and fro, swaying like the pendulum of a clock.

A fitful wind blew powdery snow off the fields, white clouds sailed past the windows, and from time to time snowflakes struck the panes. Then the sky suddenly cleared and a ray of moonlight came through the far window, forming a bright patch at the woman's feet with a black cross in the middle made by the glazing bars of the window.

Matvei finished his story. The woman looked at him and gave a mocking little laugh.

"Truly 'dead soap,'" she said softly. "Do you mind reading some more?"

She's full of whims, he thought with a little sigh. It's hard to tell what will please her.

"'April 7, 1881.

"'In the morning of the day before yesterday old Bazunov fell off the bench beside his gate; he had had a stroke, so they put some warm manure on his heart and laid him in a bed of fennel.'"

He broke off. He could not tell whether the lodger was laughing or crying.

"Hundreds of years ago," she said almost hysterically, "they laid a certain prince in fennel—was it Prince Vladimirko? Heavens!"

She must be mad, thought Matvei irritably.

"They always put warm manure on the heart and lay a person in fennel when he has a stroke," he explained, watching her furtively.

"'Dead soap,'" she murmured.

She gazed round her as if seeing for the first time the cooling samovar, the plates of sweets, the jam, the ornate frame of the looking-glass, the clock on the wall and the whole of that big uninviting room that smelt of cake, brilliantine and lamp oil. Her rumpled hair looked like dark wings on either side of her head.

Matvei returned to his notebook:

"Twice he said 'no,' and gave up the ghost. Today there was a splendid funeral, all the clergy and both church choirs took part in it and the whole town turned out. He was the oldest and cleverest of our citizens, nobody could ever get the better of him in an argument. I was sorry to see him die, even if he was no friend of mine and even cheated me out of two hundred and seventy rubles. Tears came to my eyes when his coffin was lowered into the grave."

"The rest is about myself."

"What was his business?" asked the lodger, getting up.

"All sorts of things, and he was a money-lender as well."

She gave a pale, strained smile.

"Thank you," she said. "I don't want to hear any more."

She held out her hand. "You're a strange person—very strange. How can you live in the midst of all this—live complacently? It's terrible. And it's shameful. Forgive me, but that's what it is, shameful."

And before he had time to form an answer she had gone out, turning at the door to repeat:

"Thank you."

Kozhemyakin threw his notebooks on the floor, put his elbows on the table, his head in his hands, and stared at his distorted image in the samovar.

Shameful? What business is it of yours? he thought bitterly. Who are you? My elder sister or my mother? No, you're nothing to me—nothing at all!

As he argued with her mentally he was aware of a sore spot in his heart that, long untouched, he had almost forgotten about; now that she had touched it, it was aching cruelly.

"Shall I take out the samovar?" asked Natalya sweetly, thrusting her head in at the door.

"Yes. And help me take off these boots."

She squatted down in front of him. Matvei found her smile offensive; he averted his eyes and muttered testily:

"What are you grinning at? You don't understand anything."

"Of course I don't; how can I be expected to?" she replied humbly, giving his boot a tug.

"Then there's nothing to grin at," he said more amiably as he exercised the toes of his pinched foot. "Don't keep supper waiting for me, I'm going out for a walk."

"Supper! What do you mean by talking of supper? Look at the clock, it's after midnight," she exclaimed. "It's too late to go out for a walk."

"Mind your own business!" he shouted. "Why are you all teaching me what to do?"

Half an hour later he was walking briskly along a black ribbon of road outside the town and arguing in his mind with the lodger:

I'm no worse than my fellows and there's no reason why you should make fun of me.

The moon went down and the stars were big and bright. On either side of the road gleamed bluish patches of unmelted snow, freshly powdered by the evening's light flurry. The white satin gown of winter was now in shreds and the earth, naked and shrunken, looked very small in the dark. The spotted trunks and black branches of the birches lining the road cast no shadows. Everything was cold and shrivelled except the hills, which were swollen up like the black and blue marks on a cudgelled body. The fragile crust over the puddles crunched as he stepped on them, giving off blue glints that were a reflection of the stars.

It was as quiet as at the bottom of a pool, and out of the darkness loomed memories of the past, chilling his heart: vague, hazy faces; dull, dismal voices.

Red-cheeked, snub-nosed Dunyasha squinted up at him with glittering eyes, licked her full lips (which had been kissed by dozens of men) and murmured as if in her sleep:

"Why don't you marry me, Matvei? No respectable girl will ever be allowed to marry you, you know."

They had been drinking and he found her thick-tongued chatter amusing.

"Why won't she?"

"Don't you know the gossip?" she said, plaiting her stiff hair with fat fingers. "They say you and that Tatar of yours share the same woman."

A foolish thing for her to have said, he thought as he walked farther and farther away from the town. Somebody must have put her up to it. But she couldn't really have thought I would marry her.

He recalled Sasha Setunova, the orphaned daughter of the cobbler. Tolokonnikov had been the first man to have her, and then she had gone from one to another to keep body and soul together. Matvei had offered to marry her, but she had answered derisively:

"Don't be absurd!"

She was little and thin, with plump legs, a hard sharp face and black mouse-like eyes. He liked her. There was something strong and honest in her nature, and he tried hard to persuade her to marry him, but his pleas only made her laugh unpleasantly and say:

"None of your fooling, merchant! Why, if I was to marry you, in a week's time you'd be dragging me about by the hair and kicking me in the belly. I'll die soon enough as it is. Say no more about it, and pour me out another glassful!"

When she was tipsy she grew pale, rolled her eyes frenziedly, and sang a song he heartily disliked:

"Who-o wants a ga-al like me-e?"
The la-ady made reply,
"I am already quite wo-orn out . . ."

"Please don't," he once implored her. "Do you want to make me cry? That's not what I come to see you for."

With a drunken smile that disclosed mossy teeth, she tore off her clothes and said, in the manner of her father:

"Ah, pardon me, good sir; a thousand pardons, good sir!"

She became deliberately shameless, and on the following day he recalled the experience with horror and disgust.

One night she stole all the money from his pockets and disappeared, leaving a note scribbled on a scrap of paper torn out of her prayer-book. She asked him not to report the theft to the police, saying she had lacked the courage to ask him for money and had not believed he would give it to her anyway.

Nobody believes in anybody, mused Matvei as he stumbled on.

He remembered that after the death of Pushkaryov, Natalya had tried to be to him what Vlasyevna had been to his father. But once when the women of the town had teased her in the market-place for living with the Tatar, she had

come running home, all other thoughts driven out of her mind, and thrown herself upon Shakir:

"Will they really tear us apart, dear, good Shakir?" she had wailed.

The Tatar, pale with fear and rage, had gnashed his teeth and snarled:

"What we must do? You're bad, I'm bad, only they are good. Perhaps we run away?"

One day he had come back from market covered in blood from a beating. He collapsed into a chair, felt his loosened teeth, spat, and wailed.

"Ah, ah! Shakir leave this world! Shakir is a stupid man!"

Matvei, who was standing beside the stove, was bitterly aware that there was nothing he could do to help these two whom he loved and needed; he could not even find words of comfort; he could only stand there in silence, shamed by the sight of their blood and tears.

Natalya made an attempt to wash Shakir's bleeding head, but he pushed her away.

"They'll break your head too. Ah, ah, master! What does your prophet Jesus, son of Mary, say? Make no enemy, hurt no friend. I tell you what it says in the Koran. You tell me what it says in the Bible. But here no one needs me, no one needs you."

This, then, is the sort of life we live! Matvei cried out in his heart to the woman who had come to live in his house.

The more he thought about it, the more the life about him seemed like a bad dream in which the good things were fleeting, mere flashes of promise.

He remembered sitting in Father Vitaly's overheated room. In front of him was the priest, an enormous man in a linen tunic with sleeves rolled up to the elbow. He had a chisel in one hand and the floor was strewn with shavings and bits of wood, for Father Vitaly's hobby was making

beehives out of logs. He would make a dozen or so in the course of a winter and present them to anyone who wanted them.

"Mm," he said, screwing up his benign little eyes. He had a big grey beard, a high forehead, a little red nose squeezed between two fat cheeks and a mouth that seemed to have slipped down on to his neck.

"I see. So that Mohammedan of yours doesn't want to become a Christian. Well then, to what measures is your humble servant to resort in this unfortunate circumstance? How can I condemn to oblivion the sin he has committed? That, my friend, is beyond my power. Our townsfolk are rascals, great and inveterate rascals. Boredom and idleness have dulled their wits and, being dull-witted, they seek any excuse for stirring up trouble. Alas for the peace-loving souls who are forced to live among such brutes! It is a disgrace for a pastor like myself to have to say such things to you, but it cannot be helped. Ah, me! A fine priest, I am!"

He banged his knee with the handle of his chisel and it must have been painful, for he winced, but he went on hammering.

"It's been said, 'Tend my sheep,' but not a word about swine, except once, when Christ drove devils into a herd of them. Yes, this is all most deplorable, my son. You are a faultless parishioner, and yet there is nothing I can do to help you in the present case except ask you to send your Tatar to me. I will talk to him and perhaps find some words of solace to offer him. Send him. You know my position, and how the pigs are always grunting at me, and so in the goodness of your heart I know you will forgive me my inability to help you. What a poor lot we humans are! May the peace of God go with you, my son. Sekleteya, see him to the door."

A little woman rose out of the corner and came towards him. She had big eyes, a prominent nose and delicate eyebrows.

Matvei guessed that she must be Sekleteya Dobychina, widow of Father Vitaly's nephew, a schoolmaster who had perished in a blizzard that winter. She had not been long in Okurov, but rumour had it that she was substituting for Father Vitaly's wife, who was ill with dropsy. Sekleteya did not seem a very congenial person. She held out her elbows like wings when she walked, which made her look like a chicken about to fly away.

He had met her once again on a summer evening as he was returning from Balymery. She was sitting at the side of the road under a birch-tree with a basket of mushrooms slung over her shoulder. The roots of the tree scrambled out from under her legs in all directions. She wore a blue skirt and white blouse and had tied a yellow kerchief on her head, altogether she looked bright, unexpected, and very pretty. She had slipped a spray of guelder rose behind one ear and the pale blossoms hung like an ear-ring against her cheek.

"May I take you home?" he had said, drawing in his horse.

"No thank you, I'd rather walk, but you may take my basket if you like," she had replied without a trace of the coquetry Okurov women generally displayed. "Have they stopped pestering your Tatar?"

"They still call him names, but at least they've stopped thrashing him."

"I heard what you said that time and was surprised you took it so much to heart."

"He's a very good man," said Matvei in some embarrassment.

"Yes, Father Vitaly has quite taken to him," and she gave a sad and pensive smile. "He once said, 'That Mohammedan is a great deal more Christ-like than some of my parishioners.' But I don't see what harm can come of two people of different faith falling in love with each other," she said impulsively, as if she had been thinking about it

for a long time. "After all, sooner or later all men will come to recognize a single God."

"Ye-es," said Matvei, astonished by the wisdom of her words. "How very true that is!"

"Good-bye," said Sekleteya with a nod, and set out down the road, turning presently to cut across the fields in the direction of the town.

As he watched her go he thought to himself that she had probably walked through the whole of life in just that way: slim, erect and making straight for her goal.

Shortly afterwards this woman dropped out of the life of Okurov. In recalling her he always had a vision of the roots spreading over the earth and the blossoms trembling against her cheek.

In the darkness before him something moved as large as a house, creaking and rumbling.

Out of the shadows emerged two waggons loaded with brushwood and with the thick, legless forms of peasants perched on top. A stream of obscene Okurov invective poured into the cold air.

"What the hell are you walking here for, you . . . !"

Can't pass a person without cursing him, thought Matvei, turning to gaze at the retreating waggons. They know a decent person's rarely to be met with, and so they curse whoever they meet.

An orange spot appeared on the eastern horizon, lighting up some old trees whose branches wove an intricate pattern against the light. The snow had lost its blue tinge and the earth was black. In the distance rose the vague outlines of the town: a cluster of houses in the form of a cross nestling against the earth for warmth, with here and there a wisp of smoke escaping from their chimneys, like the mournful flight of the night's dreams. The trees of the orchards had caught the houses in their dark meshes. The town was like a giant who has been seized and bound and lies on the ground more

dead than alive, his legs tight together, his arms flung out, the convent for a head and the St. Nikola belfry like a broken spear plunged into his breast.

As Kozhemyakin stood contemplating the scene with his hands in his pockets, a new and unfamiliar feeling welled up in him, something akin to pity, replacing the fear and boredom usually evoked by the sight of the town.

Try living in it for a dozen years or so! he said, mentally addressing the lodger. Just try it!

Gates began to creak, doors banged, shutter bolts were pulled back, people slipped leisurely out into the street. It was as if the waking town were coughing, clearing its throat and spitting out dark blobs of mucous.

Shakir was standing at the gate with a spade in his hands. On seeing his master he stamped his feet comically.

"Up already?" called out Matvei cheerily.

"Long ago."

"Why so early?"

"My heart couldn't sleep."

"I've been to the cemetery."

"Your heart couldn't sleep either?"

Matvei glanced into the kindly face, smiling so sadly, and gave the Tatar a little nudge with his elbow.

"You understand everything, don't you, Mohammed?"

"I understand. And you understand: no good thing can be done in a hurry. We must be patient a little while."

The Tatar pushed his cap to the back of his head, gave a sigh and spat into the road.

"They write bad words on the gate with chalk, with coal. Why did they learn to read and write? Just to write bad words?"

"Where?" said Matvei darkly, inspecting the gate.

"I rubbed it off."

They looked at each other, then glanced down the street.

"Probably the brats from the choir," said Matvei. "The

precentor is quite capable of teaching them such tricks. See that she and Boris don't catch sight of the words.

"I'll watch."

Kozhemyakin went into the house thinking of the precentor, a man with long hair and green eyes, who usually wore a brown coat.

Of late he had been passing their gate almost every evening, singing softly but distinctly as he went by:

I never stole with a dagger
through the shadowy wood,
I never lay in wait in a ditch —

The song was sad and impressive, the singer thin and puny with a long, lean face covered with pimples.

There was another man, a clerk employed by the Town Council, who also passed their gate regularly, but he was always drunk and never sang.

Five days passed for Matvei in the anxious expectation of he knew not what. He fancied the lodger nodded to him more cordially than before and her smile seemed to be sweeter and to linger longer.

But he said to himself resentfully: I'll not come begging for her favours!

And his waiting grew even more anxious: would she ever become his friend? Would he ever learn to understand her?

Suddenly something occurred that quite overwhelmed him. One evening Markusha was in the kitchen telling Boris about the mysterious bird *shchur* that lives at the intersection of forest paths, when the lodger came in and, after listening a while, interrupted by saying:

"But you yourself don't believe the things you tell, Markusha."

Markusha tossed back his head angrily.

"I'm fifty-two years old, ma'am," he barked, twitching his ears. "It'd be a disgrace if I believed such twaddle."

She gazed at him for a long time in silence, blinking her large eyes in astonishment. At last she ventured to say softly, glancing at those about her:

"Then why should you try to make others believe such twaddle?"

"To have a little peace, that's why," he whined. "I've tramped this country from sea to sea, I've been to Archangel and to Odessa and to Astrakhan, I've got more knowledge in the soles of my feet than another has in his head. I'm not one to be fooled—"

Matvei saw the lodger start as if in fear. Her face paled and lengthened and a hard look came into her eyes.

"But why should you teach others things that you yourself don't believe? Don't you realize you're deceiving them?"

He arched his back like a cat, shook his head and gave a low laugh.

"And still they keep pestering me!"

I'll send him packing, thought Matvei angrily.

The lodger walked up and down with uncertain steps.

"This is more terrible than imps and hobgoblins, than fate and doom, than even the entries in your notebooks, Matvei Savelyevich," she said with a bewildered smile. "Do you realize it? Natalya, please take Boris upstairs. Run along, Boris."

Markusha, delighted, gurgled with laughter.

"And still they keep pestering me, people do," he cried. "I may have a bigger heartache than anybody, and yet they come pestering me with their silly questions: What's the meaning of this, and what's the sense of that? And so I answer: here's the meaning of this, and there's the sense of that; and all the time I'm thinking: go to the devil and leave me alone! And they do. It makes no difference whether I lie to them or tell them the truth, they stop pestering me. Who do they think I am—God Almighty? If I was God Almighty I'd show them works to amuse them, but since I'm not God Almighty, I can only tell them tales. It's my-

self I should be comforting; I care more for myself than for anybody else. And so does everybody. When the priest preaches a sermon, he's doing it for his own sake. Everybody does things for their own sake. It makes no difference what you tell people so long as they leave you in peace. Are there devils? There are—leave me in peace! But perhaps there aren't? All right, there aren't—leave me in peace! And that's the long and the short of it, ma'am: If there are, leave me in peace, and if there aren't, leave me in peace. That's what everybody does, and I do the same. There's only one thing certain in this world: we'll all die, no matter what we believe in. Death's not to be frightened off by words, and nobody'll get to heaven alive. There you are, ma'am."

But she was walking quietly out of the kitchen with bent head, as if she had received a stunning blow.

"You'd better watch that tongue of yours, Markusha," said Matvei severely. "I'll not allow you to go on fabricating lies like this."

"Leave me alone and I won't lie," was the answer in a hard, rude, unfamiliar voice. "What does she pester me for? Why is she always after me? Who does she think I am, a clown to amuse her? God this, God that. I've got more sense in my left heel than she's got in her head. What's she always poking about in my soul for? This isn't right, that isn't right; what the hell do I care? I've lived my life, and I don't give a tinker's cuss for the right and the wrong of it. Everybody knows the way to the graveyard, and I won't have to go by myself—I'll be taken there; no danger of losing the way!"

He had stopped whittling and barked out his words harshly, vindictively and as if there were no end to them.

Shakir leaped to his feet.

"Ah-ah! Such shame! Such a shameful old man!" he shouted, waving his arms in the air.

Markusha only twisted his head from side to side and kept muttering:

"Leave me in peace, that's all. Leave me in peace."

"Stop it, Shakir," said Kozhemyakin with a wave of his hand as he got up and went out.

Tired, dejected, he sat down on the porch and tried to make out what had happened.

And I was positively afraid of him, he mused. Thought him someone special, a man apart, and it turns out he's just nothing. Suddenly he exclaimed to himself: So that's why she kept hounding him! Tracked him down! Good for her!

Above the caved-in roof of the Bubnov house hung a sickle moon that seemed about to cut down the few stars blossoming in the sky. He heard the barking of dogs, the wrenching off of nailed boards, feet crunching the ice in the shadow of the barn, and something like a sob.

"Is that you?" asked Matvei with a start.

"Yes," replied the lodger after a little pause. Then, tall and black, she moved into the light.

"What's that tearing noise?" she asked.

"Must be the poor taking the Bubnov house to pieces for firewood," he said, gazing at her respectfully and with a shade of the awe in which he had once held Markusha, the all-knowing.

"Such things are done very simply here," she observed.

"The house has reverted to the town by escheat, and there's nobody to watch it." With a glance into her pale face he asked timidly, "Did Markusha hurt your feelings?"

"Yes," she said, sinking down on one of the steps. "That is, he didn't exactly hurt my feelings, but—I don't know quite how to put it. I'd always felt that he was insincere and secretly contemptuous; that he didn't believe what he was saying. I've met many people in my life and I've discovered that most peasants disguise their feelings and are distrustful. Being with them usually leaves one with a heavy heart and a sense of bewilderment. Tonight it all came out." She paused a second before she said, with a quiet fervour that was almost suppliant: "I wanted so badly to be proved

wrong! It's too dreadful! I remembered the entries in your notebook—'dead soap,' and all that. . . ."

Why is she saying this? thought Matvei, straining to catch her every word.

"I'll give him the sack," he said.

"There, you see? Why should you?" she exclaimed unhappily.

"It's very upsetting," he explained. "I used to marvel as I listened to him; here was a man who knew everything and could explain everything, but it turns out he was just talking for the sake of hearing himself."

"Nothing could be more shocking than his lack of faith," she said as if stating a grievance, as Markusha had just done. "When you meet educated people who have no faith (there were and still are many such people) you think: well, it can't be helped; they haven't enough vigour, they're like puny plants. But he? He's the soil itself; he's of the people. And to think of his going about for dozens of years teaching others things that he himself doesn't believe! It's odious! I never knew men like that existed, and now it seems to me I've met dozens of them; men who, when they say 'yes' and 'no,' simply mean: 'Leave me in peace!' What a dreadful gulf a person puts between himself and others, between himself and the whole world! He's willing to say anything for the sake of peace. What peace? Educated people who have no faith at least believe in themselves, in their own personalities, in the strength of their will. But a man of his sort isn't even aware of himself. You remember what he said about fate? What complacent, what abysmal despair! Do you understand?"

No, he did not understand. He hung on her words and stored them up in his memory, but their meaning escaped him. He was ashamed to admit it and did not wish to interrupt her complaint, but the more she spoke, the more numerous were the gaps in his understanding. Questions popped into his mind, but before he had time to ask one, another

would jostle it aside and demand to be heard. Something inside him rushed in pursuit, trying to keep up with her, to seize and hold on to her ideas, but he succeeded only in confusing everything. To be sure, there were certain thoughts that he found coincided with his own.

"Life flows on, and then all of a sudden you realize you're living in a strange land, among strange people. And everyone seems to be pitted against everyone else, bound by no ties—no *living* ties, that is. Nothing but a noose squeezing the breath out of people—"

"That's it, a noose."

"One wants to fill in the gulf separating oneself from one's fellow-men, but it keeps growing wider and deeper—"

"Yes, wider and deeper."

These comprehensible fragments inspired him with faith in her, and when she fell silent and was lost in thought he said, first glancing about as if fearful of being overheard:

"How do you explain this, Yevgenia Petrovna: you're a Russian and I'm a Russian and yet it's hard for me to understand what you say?"

She turned to him quickly.

"Hard?"

"Yes. Some of the words you use—"

"Ah, words!" she breathed mournfully. "But you do understand that I wish people well, don't you? And that I'm honest?"

"Oh, yes," he said. "I couldn't think you were anything but honest."

He was about to emphasize his sincerity by crossing himself.

"Thank you," she said softly, holding his hand; then, shivering slightly as she glanced round the yard and up at the sky: "It's rather eerie here—and cold, too."

"Let's go inside," he suggested, and when she rose without a word and went in ahead of him, he had a sudden sweet

premonition that a momentous change in their relations was about to take place.

She walked thoughtfully about the room with raised eyebrows, saying:

"That, too, is deplorable: that you are Russian, and I am Russian, and yet we speak a different language and don't understand each other."

From where he sat on the couch he followed the shades of her expression, the transition from wonder to fear and to yearning, and his heart beat wildly as he thought: Tonight! Tonight!

He divined that her mood was different from the one when he had read his notebook to her—less proud, haughty and mocking—and he could understand the agitation he detected in her voice.

So she senses it too? he thought with something of triumph, but with even more of compassion.

She shivered, pulled her shawl tighter, and kept running her hand over her forehead, disturbing the lock of dark hair that had fallen across her cheek.

"I don't understand you, either," he heard her say. "At first I thought you were so—forgive me for saying it—ordinary."

Why should she apologize? he wondered.

"And then, unexpectedly, those appalling notebooks! As you read I seemed to hear a voice of reproach from far, far away, out of the distant past, saying to me: What has happened to you? You know French; do you know Russian? You like to read novels, you take pleasure in a fine literary style; well, here is a novel for you: a novel about 'dead soap'! You know world history, but do you know the history of Okurov?" She gave a low laugh. "That evening I was like a bird you had caught; you set about slowly plucking the feathers out of my wings, one by one, not maliciously, merely for amusement. The next day I went for a walk. I climbed a hill beyond the town and looked down upon it

with entirely different eyes. There on the snow lay a big black spider, and reaching out in all directions to the surrounding villages was the spider's web of your Okurov thoughts and beliefs—the poisonous suds of dead soap! It reached very far, catching countless people in its meshes, poisoning them with savage superstitions, torturing them with blunt, impassive cruelty. That dreadful sage—what was his name?"

"Bazunov?" said Matvei glumly.

He vaguely resented what she said about the town. Recalling how he had regarded Okurov not so long before, he observed with a sigh, "It's only a little town, of course, and so naturally our thoughts are little, too."

"What a pity I'm a woman!" she said, flinging her hands behind her head.

The words had a familiar ring.

"Why a pity?"

"It keeps me from doing things I'd like to do," she said reflectively. "I know–certain people have said this is no time for posing big problems and undertaking big tasks, that we must set about doing the simplest, most everyday things. I used to laugh at such people, but perhaps they were right. Perhaps the doing of simple tasks is our most pressing problem now; and in this lies true heroism."

And again began the baffling dance of incomprehensible thoughts and unfamiliar words. They whirled round her like the wind at the cross-roads, pushing her about, keeping her from reaching the lonely man sitting in the dark corner. There she was, buffeted from side to side, now approaching him, now receding into a haze of ideas, leaving him racked by longing.

It's not me she's talking to, it's herself, he thought. Markusha was not entirely wrong.

And when she went out–suddenly, unobtrusively, as if she had dissolved–he felt that her words had left no clear and durable impression: nothing but a blur of unfamiliar concepts.

But he was wrong. From that evening his thoughts of her were bolder, and they were tinged with pity. He had discovered her weakness.

Eerie, is it? Find yourself in a strange land? He gave a doleful little smile as he recalled her words, conscious that in some respects he was stronger than she.

The next morning Boris ran to him and said his mother was ill and could not get up.

"Ill?" repeated Matvei in alarm.

He went boldly upstairs, but on entering the little room with a ceiling like the sloping lid of a coffin, his courage forsook him.

"What's the matter?"

She smiled faintly.

"A fever—a headache—"

He could see nothing but a flushed face in a cloud of fluffy dark hair on a white pillow.

"Would you like some cranberry juice to drink?"

"Very much," she said.

"I'll tell them to bring you some. Could your talk with Markusha have brought this on?" he asked timidly, dropping his eyes.

"Certainly not. And yet—it did cost me something, of course." She smiled through lowered lashes. "I feel as though I had stumbled and shaken myself up badly."

Matvei went out thinking: How nice and friendly she was to me!

She was in bed for nearly five weeks—five weeks of holiday for him. Almost every day he came to find out how she was, and he would sit in the tiny room at the foot of the bed until she grew tired and could talk no longer.

She talked a lot and willingly, and the most important thing he gathered from it all (and this raised him considerably in his own eyes) was that everything she said came from books; all her knowledge had been acquired by reading.

"As soon as you're well you must get me books," he insisted.

"Yes, indeed. I'm glad you want to read."

"So am I."

Mentally he added: Soon I'll get to know as much as you do.

It was pleasant to realize that her superiority to him came only from books.

She kept saying over and over again that people must be taught, that then they would become better and live like human beings. She told him about people who devoted their whole lives to trying to make others upright and to cultivate in them a respect for knowledge. And for this they were thrown into jail and exiled to Siberia.

It was strange to hear that there were people who dared to pit themselves against life as they found it. But on remembering his own father, who resembled them in some respects, it was easier to believe. The lodger told him about many such people, dozens of them. He could see that she loved them deeply; her eyes shone with love and pity whenever she spoke of them. Soon he was captivated by the beauty of her stories and came to accept these noble champions of truth and justice much as he had accepted Markusha's sprites and hobgoblins. He listened to the accounts of their lives and works with the reverence with which he had once listened to the lives of the saints, but he could not imagine such people in the streets of Okurov.

Her accounts of the hardships they endured reminded him of the vivid tales his father had once told him about men of the past who had been robbers and outlaws in their youth and who in their old age had secretly retired into monasteries "to pray for the salvation of their souls." He felt that these two types, equally alien to him, had something in common, namely, a different way of life, and, while he admired it, he was no more drawn into it than into the life of a fairy-tale.

"What is to be done so that these good people shall be free to spread knowledge and truth?" he asked.

The lodger explained to him at length how freedom must be won (she became more beautiful than ever when she spoke about such things), but her words only perplexed him.

"That's all well and good," he objected cautiously, "but how can you put the whole of Russia on the same footing? Take this town, for instance: what good can our people be to the state? Nobody cares a straw about anything but his own house and family."

"Other interests will be awakened in them."

"What would happen," he mused aloud, "if our folk were called upon to act? They don't know anything and don't want to know anything except Okurov; the Dremov folk, nothing except Dremov; the Myamlin folk, nothing except Myamlin; and so on through all the eleven districts of our province, each for himself. They'd only start all sorts of rows and intrigues, and the Vorgorod folk are smarter and more pugnacious than the rest, so they'd be bound to come out on top. Naturally enough they'd support the rich districts. I'm afraid you'd first have to pour boiling water over us to purge us of our sins, or sear us in the fire, like a skillet at the beginning of Easter Week."

She gave an impatient wave of her hand, her sleeve fell back above the elbow, and from time to time her gown came open at her breast. He lowered his eyes. The beating of his heart quickened, a hammer pounded in his head, and for some minutes he heard and understood nothing.

She told him about herself: that she was the daughter of an army officer; that her parents had died when she was a child and she had been brought up by an uncle, a colonel. She had married a schoolmaster who had used his conscience rather than the official textbooks as his guide, and she had helped him in this to the best of her ability; one day their rooms had been searched, forbidden books had been found, and both of them had been exiled to Siberia. That was all.

A strange and simple story. He had expected it to be long and full of dreadful events. She told it briefly, reluctantly, frowning and sniffing disdainfully. He longed to ask her if she had loved her husband and if they had been happy together. He longed for her to tell him something about her intimate life and feelings, but he dared not ask.

"Is your uncle alive?" he said.

"Yes. He's vice-governor now," she said with a little yawn.

"Didn't he offer to help when . . . er . . . when that happened?"

"He and I see things in a different light."

"Even so, you're kinsmen."

"What are kinsmen?" she asked with a frown.

"Those of one blood, of one tribe."

" 'Blood' and 'tribe,'—obsolete ideas," she laughed; then, closing her eyes, she said gravely: "My kinsmen are those who are akin to me in spirit."

Could she be flirting with me? thought Kozhemyakin again, his heart going cold.

Often, excited by talking with her and filled with a sense of affinity with those who lived outside his own little world, he would walk out to the fields and sit on a hill to watch twilight descend upon the town, and the struggle between light and darkness. How gently night drew in, sprinkling dew over the earth, and how gently it went out, giving place to the new day!

In those hours of solitude two desires possessed him by turns: one, to do some deed which would give him the right to come back to her and say: Am I not worthy of you?—the other, to slip back to her in silence and lie at her feet like a dog.

How good it would be, he thought with a shade of sorrow, to give her everything—all his money and possessions—and go away, as Sozont had done. But more and more often he had a joyous impulse to say to her:

"You and I are both lonely, both of us are strangers here, let us live out our lives together."

He dreamed of the quiet life they would live, feeling no need of people, no resentment of them, no fear of them: only he and she, living soul to soul. It was sweet to dwell on this thought; his body was flooded with light and warmth, as if dawn were breaking in his heart.

The young grass on the hill bowed joyfully to the morning, flinging off the silver dew on to the steaming earth, and as Kozhemyakin walked home the town was enveloped in a pink haze.

Occasionally the lodger read poetry to him, and whenever she came to the word "love" he would drop his eyes in embarrassment and say to himself:

Could she be flirting with me?

One day, in the middle of her reading, she closed her eyes wearily. He froze on the spot, afraid to move a muscle. In two or three minutes she opened them again and said with a little laugh:

"I had a dream."

"A pleasant one?"

"Yes. What a pity the pleasant ones pass so quickly!"

She *is* flirting with me, decided Matvei.

She got up for the first time when the birches were putting out moist yellow leaves and the jealous finches and mocking starlings had returned from the South.

On a warm and brilliant noonday, when even in Okurov the sun seemed to have melted and spread out, turning the whole heaven into a dazzling blue sun, the lodger, pale and wasted, in a red waist and black skirt, went out into the orchard, where she walked up and down the paths for a long time, humming to herself as if murmuring a prayer, smiling happily, touching the satin bark of the birches gratefully, stepping cautiously on the moist earth as if she were afraid of crushing the young blades of grass and rosettes of plantain.

Her hair was wound round her head and glistened as if dusted with gold. She lifted her paper-thin hands and looked at them in the sun. Matvei, who was walking beside her, also looked at the transparent fingers with the red blood coursing through them, and thought:

She's like the queen in the fairy-tale who escaped from the ogre's clutches.

The velvety leaves of the clover were spangled with tiny drops of moisture, as if they had broken out in sweat with the joy of beholding the sun; pansies winked their gentle eyes; bluebells tinkled on their fragile stems; amber drops of gum gleamed on the boughs of the cherry-trees, and the apple-trees were pink with the pale buds of unopened blossoms. Delicate twigs, filled with life-giving sap, trembled in the breeze, and the bitter fragrance of wormwood streamed through the air.

Children were shouting gaily in the street, a shepherd was blowing his pipe out in the fields, nuns were digging in the convent garden and singing a song of thanksgiving in high ringing voices:

To you, oh much-sung Virgin, Mother of God. . . .

The lodger turned the soft glance of her sunken eyes upon Matvei.

"The 'much-sung Virgin' is the spring, and God is the sun. That was what people once believed, and it was a good belief. The spring could only beget good and kind gods. Let's sit down."

They sat on a bench under a cherry-tree. Golden streamers fell upon her shoulders, breast and knees, and she stroked them with her pale hands, and beneath the skin was the blood, as bright and glowing as the sunrise.

Matvei felt giddy, his heart seemed to stand still and coloured dots danced before his eyes. He got to his feet slowly, as if lifting an enormous weight, and said in a low voice:

"I've come to love you deeply, Yevgenia Petrovna. Will you marry me? Please do."

He felt a hot wave of joy surge over him: she was not angry, she did not frown, she smiled in a peculiarly friendly way and said softly:

"Ah, what a pity!"

He sat down next to her, seized her hand and pressed it to his cheek.

"I can't wait! I want you to marry me so badly! I'm so afraid! Tell me, will you marry me?"

"No," she said.

He did not believe her.

"Wait. . . ."

"No. I've waited too long as it is."

"Why have you waited too long?"

"I should have told you before you asked me," she said with gentle tranquillity, and her saying it in this way made it impossible for him to believe her.

"When I first came here—you remember when that was, Matvei Savelyevich?—I immediately said to myself: that man is going to fall in love with me. I was afraid of it and avoided you for that reason. Didn't you notice it?"

"I did," he said, listening eagerly.

"But it was difficult in the circumstances. And then Shakir and Natalya told me so many times how good you were, and how different from others, and that you had suffered such humiliation. . . ."

"Yes, oh yes!"

"They, too, would like me to marry you."

"I know," he cried, jumping up happily. "Both of them love you; they do, really. And that's how we'd live, just the four of us, as in a fortress."

She took a deep breath and drew her toe back and forth across the ground.

"I wanted to get to know you better."

Why should she say that? he thought anxiously.

"We can only be friends; I shall never be your wife," she said, and the words fell upon him like drops of cold water. "Don't think about it any more." He could scarcely hear for the buzzing in his ears. She got up and walked slowly away, and he watched her go, feeling the earth reel beneath his feet.

Hard days followed, each bringing him stunning new jolts, feverish thoughts and moods to which he had never fallen prey before. Sometimes it seemed to him that his breast was ripped open and all the sorrow and evil of the earth had entered his body through the wound and were crushing his heart.

Nothing existed for him. Even before this he had paid little attention to the rope works (Shakir managed the business very efficiently), but he had been interested in his workmen, had spent time with them at work and in the kitchen, had listened to their talk and asked them the news. But now he noticed no one but the lodger, whom he followed wherever she went.

I'm like her dog, he thought.

Whenever he came upon Boris, who spent most of his time out of doors, he would take him up in his arms, pinch him, tickle him with his beard, and ask him impulsively:

"Do you love me? Come, tell me the truth, do you?"

The child would wave his arms and legs, laugh and shout:

"Let me go, Uncle Matvei! Let me go, I have no time! I'm going to the woods with Lyuba and Vanya!"

He would rush away leaving Matvei staring at the ground and calculating to himself:

"Now he's eight. When I'm forty he'll be sixteen, and when I'm fifty he'll be twenty-six. Dear God, move her heart!"

Once he whispered to her: "Think what you're doing to me, Yevgenia Petrovna!"

"I can't help it. I can't," she said, each word like a stone hurled at him.

"Wait, don't be in such a hurry. Let me at least have hope."

"No, you must not have hope."

"Why should it be so—explain if you can, for the love of Christ! You say I'm a good man and a friend to you, and for me you are a good woman and a friend, both of us are Russian, and yet—we can't join our lives. The things I want, you have no use for, and the things you think, I cannot understand. Why should it be so?"

She tried to explain, but as he listened to the even flow of her speech he grew angry and threatened her in his heart:

It's lucky for you I'm so meek. I'm tied hand and foot by those magic words of yours . . . and by my deep love for you.

"Have you no pity?" he asked her on another occasion.

"A person doesn't love out of pity," she answered sternly, drawing herself up.

"What?" said he in amazement. "That isn't so, Yevgenia Petrovna. That's just exactly why a person does love: because he's sorry for the other, sorry to see him so unhappy in his loneliness."

But there were times when he felt that she charmed away his passion as a healer charms away disease, and for two or three days she would be to him like a beloved sister for whom he had long been waiting, and he would tell her everything as freely as if he were talking to another man: tell her about everything—his father, Pelageya, and his whole life.

Sometimes he himself was surprised by this.

What am I saying? he would ask himself.

And, glancing at her, he would see her kindly eyes, so attentive and sympathetic, her parted lips, and the grave line between her brows. The face of one who was infinitely dear to him.

It was this face that appeared to him in the long winter

nights when he lay tossing on his bed, trying to fall asleep despite the howling of the wind and the crackling of the cold; and it was this face that floated before him as he roamed the fields beyond the town on spring nights.

And again he would be filled with an irresistible longing to crush her to his breast and kiss her as he had kissed Pelageya, and to hear her weep in gratitude as Pelageya had wept, and murmur through her tears:

"It is as if I had bathed in a stream, as if my soul were washed clean by your tenderness. . . ."

Perhaps I should force her, he thought more and more frequently.

But he dared not. There was something about her that made it impossible even to think of using force. Half ill with the torture of it, angry with both her and himself, he would ask himself:

How will it end? How?

And again he would try to appeal to her compassion.

"But you pity Pelageya, you pity the common folk, you pity your suffering comrades. . . ."

"That's quite different," she would say, shaking her head. "I pity you, too, in that way. I want you to be happy, I want you to grow and develop so that you may live among your fellow-men without feeling unwanted and unneeded. The common folk must be loved and understood and helped to find their way out of the dark coils of this shameful, loathsome, grovelling existence."

She told him about hundreds of other little towns which, like Okurov, were held in thrall by a horror of anything new and by a boredom so abysmal as to lead to despair.

Filled with ignorant inhabitants ready to believe anything that did not upset them or disturb the shameful complacency of their lives, these towns, each a stranger to all others, lay dumped upon the vast earth like bricks and timber piled up by someone who had intended to erect a structure of fantastic proportions, but had disappeared,

leaving all this valuable material to rot under the snows of winter and the rains of autumn, unwatched and uncared for.

She spoke well, beautifully and ardently, like a young novice reciting the story of the Annunciation aflame with faith, adoring and envying the Virgin Mary, who had been chosen to give birth to the Son of God.

Her slender fingers stirred as she spoke, as if she were plucking the strings of an invisible *gusli* or weaving bright pictures of the life of long ago in the towns of Novgorod and Pskov. Her eyes shone with childlike joy and her face was radiant.

"See? Our people aren't so bad! They once knew how to live!" she exclaimed, tossing back her head.

Often as he listened to her he would half shut his eyes and fancy he was a little boy listening to his father (only the voice was different), so like were her tales to those his father had told him.

"But things are different now," he said sadly.

He hated to disappoint her and himself, and it was a pity to spoil the stories, but he had to show her that he, too, knew some things: he knew the real life of the Russian people, the people living in the Okurov, Gnilishchi, Myamlin and Dremov districts of the Vorgorod Province.

With lowered eyes and in the singsong voice of a priest reading the funeral service, he told her how the peasants drank, fought, stole, beat their wives and children, lived with their daughters-in-law, and cheated him whenever he went to the villages to buy hemp.

At first she listened attentively, asking questions and sympathizing with him, but in a little while she began to bite her lips and gaze past him.

"They gouge each other's eyes out, and if a clever man happens to appear among them, they fall on him like a pack of wolves," he said in a low tone. "You heard what Markusha said about that man named Natruskin. Well, I

don't suppose there's a single village that hasn't made short work of some Natruskin or other."

"Ah, you see? There *are* people of a different sort!" she exclaimed triumphantly.

"One in a thousand."

He told her about Savka and the strange way he had of saying "ma-a-aster."

"He was a real peasant; he would have sold his father and mother for a ruble, and tried to pass off fake coins at that."

The lodger shook her head, and this only made his bitter memories rise to the surface with greater force. He grew excited and waved his hand in the air as if clearing the way for all the base and evil deeds of the past whose shadows had long been crowding in upon him, and in his agitation he spoke to her as to a Father Confessor:

"When the woman I loved was being beaten I lay in the orchard and wondered whether it was happening or not. I didn't stand up for her, I didn't go to her aid. True, it was my father who did it, but I could at least have thrown myself at his feet. I let him kick the baby out of her belly. The child would have been fifteen years old now. . . ."

"Don't speak of that again," she implored without looking at him.

The first time he had told her of how he had sinned with Pelageya and of how his father had killed her, she had listened with an avidity she had never shown before; a dark flame leaped up in her eyes and various expressions passed over her face. Suddenly tears had streamed down her grief-stricken face and her head had drooped slowly, as if someone were pushing it down against her will.

He had seized her hand, kissed it impulsively three times, and gone away muttering:

"Thank you, Yevgenia Petrovna. I'm going to visit her grave and tell her about . . . Thank you."

It was a hot spring, threatening drought. A thick fog rose out of the bog and spread in the windless air, carrying the sour and sickening smell of decay to the town. The burning sun, hazy and rayless, looked like a wilted sunflower. Instead of bringing refreshing breezes, the nights draped the town in shadows as black and stuffy as widows' weeds. The moon was an enormous wheel. Red and sinister, it rose slowly over the town, and it, too, seemed to add to the closeness of the air. The winter wheat lost its greenness, the grass withered, the yellow buttercups, red poppies, bluebells and all the other poor blossoms of the sterile fields curled up their petals and meekly hung their heads; the earth was laced with jagged cracks that looked like lips distorted by the tortures of thirst.

In the day-time droves of flies, humming like live wires, circled in the air, martlets darted shrieking down the street, all the other birds sought shelter in the shadows; towards evening clouds of mosquitoes flew up from the swamps and whined the whole night through.

The sweating townsfolk moved about languidly, they gazed up at the sky with angry reproach, spoke to each other unwillingly, listlessly, wearily, hopelessly, lost their tempers at the slightest provocation, shouted at one another, and cursed in foul language.

Kozhemyakin could not sleep at night; his head ached from insomnia, the hair at his temples turned grey, his flesh, racked by a passion that daily increased and knew no relief, wasted away, his face was drawn, his eyes had a helpless, desperate look. As if through a haze he saw the sympathetic glances of Shakir and Natalya and the mocking smiles of the workmen, and he knew that the gossips were spreading base rumours about him and the lodger. But inwardly he shrugged his shoulders and said:

What does it matter?

At night he went out into the fields and listened to the plaintive whispering of the dry grass, the rustle of hungry

field-mice, the anxious whirr of the grasshoppers—an odd, dry murmur on every hand, like the soft sighing of the tortured earth. As he walked his mind kept repeating words long familiar to him:

Love me! Pity me!

And he fancied that everything about him was echoing these words in a hot and steady whisper.

He walked with his hands locked behind him, as his father had walked, with bowed head and bent back, dragging his feet heavily. Mentally disrobing the woman he desired, he lifted her up in the stifling air and carried her before him, saying to her:

"My father was a good man, but a beast; I am not a beast, and children begotten of you would be even more like human beings. Yevgenia darling! Only in that way, through love, can new and better people be born!"

He saw her breasts, ripe fruit formed to suckle new lives, and he recalled the pink teats of Pelageya's breasts, straining upwards as if seeking an infant's lips. These pictures faded, giving way to coarser ones; he clenched his fists and walked faster, broke into a sweat, and threw himself down, panting and exhausted, on the dusty grass by the side of the road.

Sometimes on reaching home he would pace the yard like a tiger, glance up at the attic window with narrowed eyes and bite his lips. It was all he could do to prevent himself from calling out to her loudly and imperiously:

"Come here!"

But each time his courage failed him. Spent, broken, burnt out, he would go inside, drop on to his bed and surrender himself to the horror of his visions.

If I had my father's spirit I would have done with all this long ago! I must use force! he said to himself.

A new man came to work in the yard at about this time. He was small and ragged and bony, and he had spindly legs, a sallow face and an incongruous little beard. His

eyes were comically crossed, and to hide this he screwed them up so that the slits looked like the two blades of a pocket-knife, one longer than the other.

He was Markusha's successor, and he at once attracted attention by his polite and compelling smile and his quick and pithy manner of speaking. The workmen met him with scornful hostility. After giving him a careful scrutiny, Foma, a thin, round-shouldered, hatchet-faced peasant from Voyevodin, announced:

"It's creatures like him that bring the drought."

The new yard porter had taken refuge behind Shakir's broad back, and from there came his unexpected reply in a high thin voice:

"It's not me that brought the drought, my good man, it's gullies that bring droughts, and this was told me by a very learned gentleman. The ones in charge have let the gullies grow and the water drain into them, and now a very cruel drought's ahead of us, good people."

Foma opened his mouth and looked round at his companions.

"You certainly are a fool, brother, a hopeless fool," he said, looking at the man over Shakir's shoulder.

Everyone burst out laughing except Shakir. He took the new yard porter into the barn and said to him:

"You hold your tongue; they'll give you a beating."

"I don't believe in fists," said the little fellow.

Another queer bird, thought Kozhemyakin, who was sitting in the shadow of the barn.

On engaging the porter, he had learned from the man's passport that he was Alexei Ilyich Tivertsev, twenty-seven years old, from the town of Tupoi Ugol. He had looked him over briefly and said:

"You look like a deacon."

"Perhaps," the man had answered politely. "Nobody in Ugol looks like what they're supposed to; you've got to take us as we come."

Kozhemyakin felt there was something sly and unreliable about him, and so he was surprised to find that Yevgenia Petrovna held lengthy and heated discussions with him and that he listened to her attentively and replied seriously, laconically, and to the point.

He remembered that when she had first come to live in his house she had often gone out to the rope works and sat there shivering, trying to get into conversation with the workmen, who answered her questions curtly, sniggering into their beards and exchanging meaning looks with one another; when she left them they passed offensive remarks about her, and although there was no spite in what they said, their cold indifference was worse than spite.

Later, when they saw the esteem in which their employer held her, they bowed low whenever she came in sight, snatching off their caps and cringing like beggars, and they adopted an obsequious tone when speaking to her, sighing and agreeing with everything she said.

"What a downtrodden lot your workmen are!" she had once said to him sadly.

Matvei thought to himself:

Just marry one of them and you'll see how downtrodden they are!

He had always resented the attention she paid to the common folk. He felt she gave them something he had more need of and more right to than they. And now here she was spending whole evenings talking to spindly-legged Alexei. Why should she?

After supper, when work was over and the town was caught in the sweaty embrace of another suffocating night filled with the whine of thousands of insects, the five inhabitants of the house would go out and sit on the steps or in the orchard. Shakir would make a small fire and wave branches of wormwood over it, sending thin blue ribbons of smoke in the direction of Matvei and the lodger to drive

away the mosquitoes. The people would cough and sneeze, but the mosquitoes went on buzzing and biting undaunted.

The high voice of Alexei, the newcomer, merged with the drone of the insects.

"There's a lot of water where I come from because there are lots of streams, but there's not much land and what there is is barren, so most of the folk have gone away to seek their fortune elsewhere. The Poles used to tan our hides for us in the old days, but that didn't teach us anything, except the women to knit socks and make sausages to sell. You'd be surprised how many sausages the people in Moscow can put away! The peasants don't do much but complain: they go about complaining of their hard lot, saying God's forgotten them, the officials have it in for them, the priest doesn't teach them anything, they've got no wish to learn of themselves, and altogether there's no knowing what they were born for and what sense there is in living in a godforsaken place like Tupoi Ugol."

He darted his crooked little eyes in all directions, smiled politely, and swatted mosquitoes, while his words kept trickling out of him like water through a hole in a pail.

"If you ask me, human beings don't do anything much but sit. For fifty years they sit and think what they can do to enjoy themselves, and in the fifty-first they turn up their toes and die the babies they were born, except for the grey beards on their chins."

The moon hung motionless over the orchard as if pasted to the murky sky. Shadows were short and stumpy, the dusty leaves of the trees hung down lifelessly, everything languished in the silent, enervating heat. The only sounds to be heard were the occasional scream of a night-bird, the hoot of an owl in the bog, or the caterwauling of homeless cats in the deserted Bubnov house.

The lodger sat with bent head, hiding her face, listening to Alexei, watching his incongruous beard shake as he talked, watching him push his crumpled cap from one ear

to the other. From time to time she would ask him a question, then again fall silent, slapping her neck or cheek lightly with her hand.

She talks less and asks more questions these days, said Matvei to himself as he watched her hand flitting like a white bird in the darkness.

A drab little thought came to him as he sat there:

Here we sit, the five of us, all different, yet all like homeless wanderers on this earth.

"Heavens above!" groaned Natalya. "It's too hot to sleep and too hot to stay awake!"

"Why you say such things?" said Shakir warmly to the new yard porter. "God says: work. Russian says: no sense in working, you only die anyway. Why say such things? The Russian is sly, he doesn't like work."

After one such evening, Matvei said jealously to the lodger:

"Why are you so friendly with that Alexei?"

"I find him interesting," said Yevgenia Petrovna.

"It seems to me he snaps his fingers at everything, like Markusha." And he added, after a moment's consideration: "Only he sees things from a different angle."

She glanced round as if looking for something.

"That Natruskin—do you remember him?" she said pensively.

"Yevgenia Petrovna," he said in soft supplication. "Take pity on me. Love me. I implore you to like a beggar. I'll do anything you ask, believe anything you say. Tell me to give everything I have to my workmen, and I'll do it."

"Do you know what I've decided?" he heard her say calmly. "To go away, and very soon, too. Everyone can see how you feel, and I find that trying. Even Boris said to me the other day: 'Why does he stare at you like an Indian?' "

"It'll be the end of me."

She lifted her shoulders and walked away unhurriedly, shaking her head.

That she should have walked away so unhurriedly made him think with a stab of hope:

She's afraid to say yes; she's afraid I'll deceive her, that I won't marry her, bless her heart! I must be bolder. What have I to fear?

A few days later a moist wind blew from the west, blue-black clouds gathered over Lyakhovskoye Bog, unfurled like mourning banners in the burning sky, and sailed over the town.

The daws and crows shrieked loudly, the wind swept shavings into the yard, bits of hemp and fluff were caught up in little whirlwinds, a gate banged like a gunshot, from all the yards came the shouts of children and the shrill voices of women as they set tubs to catch the rain-water.

A branch of the lime-tree growing beside the convent belfry kept beating against the bell, making it ring joyfully. Out in the fields the cowman blew on his pipe to summon the herd, for already lightning was darting and thunder rolling.

Kozhemyakin went out on the verandah and stood with his eyes half-closed to shield them from the dust, listening to the murmur of the thirst-tortured earth.

The lodger had just begun a lesson with her little scholars, but now they came rushing out into the yard and whirled about with the shavings and fallen leaves. Lyuba, as white and fluffy as a bit of down, held her skirts between her knees and clapped her hands delightedly as she watched Boris and fat Vanya Khryapov dancing like savages. Seizing each other's hands, they stamped on the ground as hard as they could and shouted till they were red in the face:

Lord, send rain
To field and plain,
Open wide the sky
And water the rye.

"Not like that!" cried Lyuba.

But they went whirling round in a column of dust and only shouted the louder:

Virgin Mary, pray
Send us rain this day,
Let the water flow,
So the crops will grow.

"Look, my son, too, has turned into a pagan," Matvei heard someone say behind him. He turned and devoured the woman with hungry eyes.

She was wearing a white Mordovian blouse, wide and collarless. The fine linen fell in soft folds, emphasizing the seductive curves of her shoulders and breasts.

Sparse drops of warm rain were striking the roof noisily; they bounced up off the hot ground in the yard and the dust leaped up after them and gobbled them up. It grew dark as the clouds closed over the yard. Lightning flashed, everything shuddered, the ruins of the Bubnov house leaped up and fell back with a deafening bang, the children shrieked and made a dash for the barn, and the next instant there was the roar of a downpour that might have been a river pouring out of the sky.

The dust rose in a cloud, only to be beaten back and destroyed; yellow ribbons of water wriggled across the yard; bright streams poured off the roofs. The downpour increased till nothing was seen but a gleaming wall of water.

"How good! How marvellous!" Matvei heard her say through the joyful plash and roar.

He was conscious of a humming in his ears and warm waves rising in his chest.

"It's chilly," he said without looking round. "And damp. You'd better go inside."

"Just think of what must be happening in the orchard!" she exclaimed.

She won't go, he said to himself.

And suddenly he realized that she had gone.

As falteringly as a blind man he made his way to Pelageya's room. Yevgenia was standing with her arms clasped behind her head, looking out into the orchard. Noiselessly he latched the door and went over and slipped his arms round her.

"Yevgenia darling," he whispered, "kill me afterwards if you like . . . it doesn't matter. . . ."

The woman's body seared his hands, he tightened his hold, she half turned and he saw her tender eyes, her parted lips, and he heard her murmur softly:

"Don't, dear, you mustn't. . . ."

He lifted her in his arms as easily as if she had been a child and pressed her to his heart, she deftly turned her breast to him and for one brief moment pressed moist lips to his dry ones. He staggered with her through a red haze, but suddenly she began to struggle and cried:

"Put me down!"

Slipping out of his grasp like a fish, she ran to the door from where, with one hand unfastening the latch and the other straightening her blouse, she pronounced words that drained all the strength out of him:

"I can't deceive you—I know myself too well: if this should happen I would despise myself and hate you. This is not a thing to be taken lightly. Forgive me if I am to blame."

He sank down on a chair conscious of only one thing: she was leaving. When she had slipped out of his arms, it was not only her body of which she had robbed him, it was his own courage and strength as well. He instantly realized that all was over: he would never have her. He sat rocking to and fro, holding his head in his hands, looking at her flushed and agitated face and shining eyes, and he fancied she was melting. She had tipped up his heart like a cup and drained everything out of it but dregs of shame and yearning.

"Go away," he said with a hopeless wave of his hand.

She went. The hook on the door swung back and forth with a little click. On the floor lay two hairpins and a little white handkerchief twisted into a ball.

If anyone sees them they'll imagine something that never happened, he thought. He picked up the hairpins and tossed them on to the table and covered the handkerchief with his foot, instantly forgetting about it.

The downpour passed. Gold patches of sunshine lay on the ground in the orchard, the trees waved their freshly washed boughs, drops as bright and alive as quicksilver fell off the leaves, and the warm air was drenched with the fragrance of steaming foliage.

Gay voices came from the yard.

"I thought there'd be hail," said Natalya.

The children laughed and so did Shakir in his cheerless whimpering way, and Alexei could be heard saying:

"Thrown at us like alms, as if the giver was spiteful: here, rub your noses in it!"

Kozhemyakin sat listening to the thump of the words against his hollow chest and thought to himself:

And she refused me alms.

Suddenly he felt ashamed to the point of fury; he had an impulse to clutch his hair, jump out of the window and wallow in the mud like a pig, or shout and curse at the top of his voice.

The sparrows twittered noisily, a finch peeped in a rowan-tree, the crows cawed their approbation, and Lyuba called out:

"Oh, oh! You'll drown!"

"Stop it, Boris!" came Yevgenia Petrovna's sharp command.

"He's all wet anyway," lisped Vanya.

Matvei felt tears rolling slowly down his cheeks. One of them rolled into his mouth and the cold saltiness of it made him want to howl like a wolf.

She'll go away, he thought.

He was sure he could not bear to see her on the next day or any day thereafter; how could he ever put down his injured masculine pride or suppress his rising anger?

I myself will go away; I might say something to her I'd be sorry for.

The door was opened cautiously. Matvei wiped his face quickly and turned round. It was Shakir.

"Time for tea."

"I don't want any. Tell Alexei to harness the horse. I shall probably spend the night in Balymery."

The Tatar disappeared and Matvei heard him say sadly:

"He 's leaving for Balymery."

Again the door was opened and hope flared up in him. He dropped his head and heard a quiet, gentle voice:

"Let's forget all this, all this dark side, Matvei Savelyevich. Let's have a friendly talk."

"Ah, Yevgenia Petrovna," he said, without looking at her, "you've cast a spell over me for life. I'm ashamed. Please go away."

He battled with a dreadful longing to throw himself at her, seize her, twist and bend her until she cried out in pain.

"Don't you see . . . I cannot, because . . . because—"

"Go away," he insisted dully.

And she went without a sound.

Half an hour later he was seated in a little wicker gig, driving his horse furiously. Flying mud struck him in the face and on the chest; the sleek horse snorted as it splashed through puddles not yet sucked up by the parched earth.

Clenching his teeth, Kozhemyakin looked behind him. The sun was low in a clear bright sky and its rays, striking fires in the windows of the houses, breathed hotly upon him.

He opened the collar of his shirt, threw back his head, and half closed his eyes to shield them from the flying mud. And as he galloped ahead, lacerating thoughts galloped beside him:

I never lifted my hand to a woman—and what women there were—Dunka and Sashka—as if she could be compared with them! And yet I want to hurt her. Ah, my love, my darling, you struck my heart like lightning! If only I could beat you! And then wallow at your feet afterwards and drink your tears! Here am I on my way to Mokei Chapunov's—a bad character, Mokei—a man who stole his own daughter-in-law. I'll burn myself up, body and soul! Why not? None but the devil cares about me.

The thoughts came pressing upon him from all sides and from down below like a swarm of flies, then vanished without making the slightest impression on the burden that lay like a dead weight on his heart, forcing tears out of his tightly shut eyes.

Over thirty years old and still a fool! he said to himself reproachfully as the village street rose ahead of him in the distance and swiftly, hungrily, bore down upon him like a yawning jaw filled with jagged, decayed teeth.

He drew up in front of Chapunov's big hut and Mokei himself, who was sitting outside, nodded a head as bald as an egg.

"How are you?"

"See to my horse," said Kozhemyakin, leaping down into the mud. "I've come for entertainment."

The bow-legged barefooted peasant wrinkled up his face, scratched his bloated belly with the girdle tied underneath it, and called out in a peremptory bass:

"Anna! Lyuba! Open the gate!"

Then he said suggestively, narrowing his pale empty eyes:

"Feel the need of a little spree after the rain? That's right. The earth's had relief and a man needs it too."

Matvei gazed back towards the town. A rosy haze hung over the fields, and through it could be glimpsed gold-flecked red patches that looked like bits of calico strewn by a generous hand. The sun had dropped behind the far hills and the town was out of sight. High overhead stretched the flaming wings of the sunset, and a single black cloud was swimming like some monstrous fish in a sea of flame.

"The Myamlin woods was set on fire; three days it's been burning. Is it out yet?"

"How should I know?" said Matvei with asperity.

The flooded ruts of the road gleamed like satin ribbons, pointing the way back to Okurov. As Matvei's eyes ran over them he secretly waited for the black silhouette of a horseman to appear against the red sky (Shakir or Alexei) and come galloping up between the ribbons with his elbows beating against his ribs and call out to him from the distance:

"Yevgenia Petrovna has sent for you!"

Crows were flying low over the fields, and whenever a bird swept past a puddle it became two birds. A tall woman with heavy eyebrows and a sad expression on her face came out and bowed to Matvei.

"Give me the keys," she said to Mokei.

"She's the one I want—Anna," announced Matvei brusquely as soon as the woman had left.

The peasant retied his girdle and made a face.

"Her? Anna?" he asked.

"Yes, her."

"Can't have her," chuckled the man. "You know why."

"Why?"

"She's supposed to be my son's wife. She's my daughter-in-law; you know that."

Kozhemyakin was in a mood to argue, shout, make a scene.

"You're a bastard, Mokei! Where's your son?"

"Where he belongs, thief that he is!"

"He never stole your money and you know it! You set a trap for him so that you could take his wife! Don't deny it!"

The peasant yawned, made the sign of the cross over his mouth, and replied complacently:

"Nobody can prove such a thing. A pack of lies. Don't believe them. The law's the law, and according to the law my son Vasya's got to stay in jail and you and me are free to do as we please. Let's go inside."

Matvei's belligerent mood petered out. There was no one worth fighting with. And he no longer cared to gaze down the road: the sunset had faded, the bits of calico had been gathered up, as had the satin ribbons, and the puddles were now a dark blue.

Inside the hut they were met by Lyuba, the wife of Mokei's nephew who was doing army service. She was small and thin, with moist eyes and a big scar on her forehead. Bowing from the waist, she said:

"Good-day to you, Matvei Savelyevich, sir!"

It had been a long time since he had last been in this hut, which was bigger and cleaner than most peasant huts, but he felt as if only yesterday he had seen that icon corner with its five icons, the looking-glass with the peaked frame, the clock with the motionless pendulum and the horseshoe fastened as a weight to one of the chains, and the low, wide sleeping-bunks.

Lyuba brought in a tray with vodka and food. He gulped down three glasses of vodka, which instantly went to his head. He did not enjoy drinking; he disliked the taste of vodka as well as its effect on him. It sapped his strength and dulled his wits without robbing him of them altogether, so that he perceived everything, but dimly, hazily.

For three days he wallowed cheerlessly and heartlessly in the mud of a village debauch. At times he shed drunken tears and wailed to the distorted image of Lyuba's face:

"Lyuba! Try to look like her, just once, just for a

moment, I'll give you everything I've got! You can't, can't you, you slut?"

Mokei cried, too; cried and shouted:

"You're Matvei, I'm Mokei—that's all the difference there is between us, see? We're all humans in the sight of God. All dogs are dogs to you and me; all of us are humans to God, and that's all. N-n-no difference at all, see?"

"That's a lie!" cried Matvei, beating his chest with his fists. "She's different. Nobody's as good as her—nobody!"

Mokei kissed him on the cheek.

"Oh, come! We're all just humans. Where's the truth? Perhaps I'm the truth? I'm no good, I'm a scoundrel, a rascal—that's the truth, God's own truth!" He crossed himself. "Merciful God, what makes you put up with us?"

Kozhemyakin fell on his knees in front of big-mouthed, blubbering Lyuba:

"I met a certain woman, the only one who could have saved me from this life, and now it's all over," he said. "No one's come riding up on a horse. She didn't send anyone. She built new towns for me, filled them with fine people, called me to climb the belfry with her—and threw me down. And here I am. She's gone. In other words, I'm not good enough for her."

He beat his head against the bunk.

"What am I good for at all if I'm not good enough for her?" he sobbed. "Dear God, you killed the living soul in me by showing her to me. Why?"

Drunken Lyuba tried to lift him off the floor. Her tears dripped on his head and neck and he heard her wail:

"You poor unhappy boy! Buy yourself a honeycake, pray on it to the three brothers, Usinya, Borodynnya and Nikita Mamenty, ask them to intercede for you, say these magic words to them: 'Come swiftly, three brothers, in the name of three mothers; blow, winds, blow; melt the snow, and melt the heart of her I know,' and then speak her name."

Mokei, who was sitting on the floor, pulled Matvei towards him:

"You've touched my heart. Call Anna, Lyuba. If it's Anna you want, you shall have her—for twenty-five rubles. Twenty-five rubles to Anna, the whore, and twenty-five to me! I'm a rascal, brother. She'll be sweet to you. She'll give you anything you want. You've touched my heart, brother!" Then he roared at the top of his lungs: "God in heaven! Why do you have anything to do with a wretch like me?"

The room heaved and went round in slow circles, and there, standing like a sentry beside the stove, was tall, silent Anna with her arms crossed on her breast and her eyes fixed on the ceiling. She stood as if carved of stone, and her eyes were filmy, like the eyes of the dead.

"Go away, you dead cow!" Mokei shouted at her.

"Quiet, old man; where am I to go?" came the response in a flat, cold voice.

"Matvei Savelyevich!" wailed Mokei, crawling over the floor like a spider. "Look at her! There she is, my ruination! God sent her as a punishment for my sins!"

Suddenly he burst out singing wildly:

A snowball-tree is growing
On a hill outside the town. . . .

"Sing, Anna, you witch!"

The tall woman shut her eyes and began to sing in an unexpectedly fine and mournful voice:

Beneath the tree there lies a stone,
Beneath the stone there lies my love. . . .

"Matvei, look at her, the witch!"

Slain was he on a fearsome night
Foully slain by an unknown hand. . . .

Lyuba rocked to and fro on the bench and howled like a hungry wolf:

Slashed his breast and broken his bones,
And his lily hands all smeared with blood. . . .

Mokei, who in trying to get up had only succeeded in getting on all fours, went on rasping:

Dead, ah, dead, my robber chief. . . .

All the way from Balymery to Okurov, Matvei was haunted by ghoulish memories of these people, their songs and their talk. He reached home at night, ill from unaccustomed dissipation and oppressed by a sense of shame and misery.

And they call that having a good time! he said to himself. And it's always like that: everything soaked in tears; the songs, the dancing, just empty noise and shouting, as if a man said to himself: Here, what'll happen if I start shouting?

Stars were blossoming in the dark sky. He remembered that his father had once called them Russian stars, and that Yevgenia Petrovna knew the names of all the big ones. She also called flowers by unfamiliar names.

There was a smell of burning in the air, a peatbog had caught fire, and the acrid odour tickled his nose and made his head spin. Down in Lyakhovskoye Bog owls were mewing like cats.

Yevgenia Petrovna reminded him of a cat whenever she crossed the yard holding up her skirts and picking her way fastidiously. And perhaps when nobody was looking, under cover of her skirts, she shook the dust off her feet as a cat shakes it off its paws. But most of all she reminded him of a nun, so austere was she, even if she did wear colourful clothes. She never went to church, but she spoke simply, fearlessly and ardently of Christ.

Once he had said to her:

"Somehow the way you worship God is different from our way, Yevgenia Petrovna."

To which she had replied:

"That is because you recognize the existence of God but do not worship him."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that."

"Everybody recognizes the existence of God."

"That's just it: God exists and you exist, but there are no bonds between you."

He felt she had voiced a dangerous heresy and avoided speaking to her on the subject again.

Now as he drove home, he said to himself: How am I ever going to face her? I must be a sight. What a pig I've made of myself! I'll make them heat the bath-house and give myself a scrubbing.

He had wallowed in mud, he had sullied and castigated his body, and for this he held himself in contempt and disdain, but his love for the lodger had become more pure and serene. He felt that he had done her an injury.

Holding in his horse like a thief in the night, he drove up to the gate, dismounted, and cautiously lifted the iron knocker once or twice. In the darkness he saw the white gleam of an obscene word written in chalk on the fence.

"Damn them!" he swore under his breath as he snatched off his cap and erased it.

He heard the quick patter of bare feet and the click of the bolt as the gate was opened. Shakir, in a shirt that reached to his heels, silently took the horse's bridle.

"Sh-sh!" said Matvei. "You'll wake the house."

"No," said Shakir dully.

"Somebody wrote on the gate again."

"They always do."

As Matvei went up the steps he turned round to ask:

"Is Boris well?"

From the other side of the horse Shakir replied in an unnecessarily loud voice:

"They've gone away—both gone away."

Kozhemyakin sank down on the step.

"They've gone to live with the paymaster."

Stunned, unable to believe his ears, Matvei sat there muttering under his breath:

"Gone away. How can that be? Without a word? She ought to have waited till I came back. Why did you let her go?" And he added, quite against his will: "What's to become of me now?"

As though awaiting its own extinction, the short summer night hid in secluded corners: in the tall grass, and in the ruins of the Bubnov house. It was as if its darkness congealed into masses that took the form of barns, trees and roofs, clearing the atmosphere for the rosy light of dawn. Some of the shadows entered the breast of this man and lay cold and clammy upon his heart.

A sense of weariness flowed through his limp, poisoned body, and in his mind he heard Lyuba's shrill voice singing:

Ah, me! Bereft am I of kith and kin. . . .

Shakir, whose long night-shirt made him look like a corpse in a shroud, said softly:

"She left you a letter."

"A letter," said Matvei hopelessly. "What do I want with a letter?"

"The Lord's will . . ." murmured the Tatar as he went into the house. The door creaked.

Everything's over, thought Matvei, turning round.

He sat there till dawn, the sheet of paper covered with fine writing in his hand. The letters merged into black lines that he could not and did not care to decipher. At last the sky became a pale green; the birds began to wake up in the orchard and the shadows to slink away from trees and

fences as if morning were scaring recalcitrant night out of hiding. Then he began to read the long letter slowly, line by line.

"Dear Matvei Savelyevich,

"I went away so that my presence should not be a burden to you, and soon I may leave Okurov altogether. I shall not attempt to explain the circumstances that stand between you and me; I find it very painful to dwell on them and I doubt that you would consider anything I said convincing. Believe me when I say that I would never make a fitting wife for you, and as for showing you pity—I showed it to another once, and for four years I had to go on lying to him, and to myself as well.

"There is still another reason why I must refuse to marry you, but I think you would find little comfort in it if I told you what it was.

"I wish to thank you for offering me your affection, for being so kind to my son, and for helping me to understand many things. I was given a glimpse of a dreadful way of life, and it has made me accept people more simply and adopt a more serious attitude towards myself and others. Perhaps no more profound and penetrating observation on heroism was ever made than: 'Love, labour and endurance comprise the highest form of heroism.' If you only knew how I should like you to give thought to Russia, to the causes making her people either unhappy and hysterical, or unhappy and phlegmatic. It is not too late for you to begin studying; you are still young in spirit and you suffer terribly from the miserable life you lead and from knowing that the goodness within you, which others have such great need of, is beeing put to no account. As long as I live I shall remember you, a man living alone in a little town that is like a prison, all the inmates of which have been turned by boredom into wardens spying upon one another.

It hurts me to think of you. Farewell, do not be angry with me, and forgive me if I have in any way done you wrong.

"Yevgenia Mansurova."

What a fine hand she writes! thought Matvei, and he began to read the letter over again. Others have need of my goodness? And what about her? If she doesn't need it, why should others? Ah, she was kind to me: she patted me on the head—and passed me by.

But the warmth of her voice and her look were in those little black letters written in a fine hand with many of the words scratched out (evidently she had written in a hurry). He read the letter once more, and on coming to the end a sudden memory made him fold it gingerly, touching it with only the tips of his fingers.

"Shakir!" he called.

The Tatar entered behind him.

"Have the bath-house heated. Hotter than usual."

Shakir opened his mouth to say something.

"Leave me alone, if you please," Matvei put in hastily. "I'm going to have a nap. Call me as soon as the bath's ready."

For a week he lived in a state of constant expectation; and as the days went by his expectation became filled with alarm presaging disaster.

He did not believe that everything was over. The house was strange without Yevgenia, and he felt he could never grow accustomed to her absence. He took the glum faces of Shakir and Natalya and the darting smiles of Alexei as condemnatory.

Could she have told them I seized her that night? he wondered as he roamed in solitude through the orchard.

He was used to the boredom being dispersed every morning by Boris's incessant chatter. He was used to talking to

Yevgenia freely and without embarrassment on all manner of subjects, including himself, and he had grown to love the sound of her steady, encouraging voice. With increasing clarity he realized how essential to him were her stories, opinions, everything she said, for, however extravagant and incomprehensible he found them, they always excited new thoughts and feelings.

How she had exposed Markusha!

As he involuntarily compared the last few months with the long drab ribbon of life preceding them, he clearly perceived that the lodger had drawn him out of the corner in which he had been living like a clod and had set him upon the threshold of something new. And then, having given his soul a shaking, having thrown him into a state of unrest he would never get over, she had gone away.

Often he was filled with resentment.

Give me those books you promised me! Where are they? Don't hide them! Don't leave matters hanging in the air! Finish what you have to say, so that I can understand and argue with you. Perhaps I will prove that everything you say is untrue—everything; what you said about the common folk and—and everything.

He would spend whole days making up speeches in which he would mock, reproach, condemn her, but then would come moments when all his protests would seem empty and artificial and would dissolve in a vast, immeasurable longing.

The obviousness of his need of her was unbearable. Shaken as he was to his very foundations, her absence meant his ruin. He felt he would resort to drink, lechery, the love of harlots, anything to deceive himself, to find refuge from the horrible loneliness that swooped down upon him with a force he had never known before.

In the grip of his awful yearning, he would sit in a secluded corner of the orchard and think to himself:

I'll go to her and say, "Do anything you wish to me,

only don't leave me!" And she'll say, "There's nothing I wish."

Crushed by the thought, he would reread the crumpled letter that he knew by heart and find some consolation in it.

This is a document, he would say to himself. There's no denying a document.

One evening after supper, as he was sitting by the window in his own room, he heard Alexei making one of his usual iconoclastic speeches in a cheerful voice:

"There are certain sayings invented just to soothe people, like putting compresses on a boil: 'All men are woven of the same thread,' or 'One man's as good as another.' A pack of lies! All people are different, and so they were meant to be. Take Yevgenia Petrovna, is she like other folk? No more than a star's like a cranberry. Or our master, who'd ever think he was a merchant? A fine merchant, him! Grinding a barrel-organ would suit him better."

Why should he wish a barrel-organ on me? laughed Matvei to himself without taking offence.

"And me? Who'm I like? Oh, no; now that folk have branched off in different directions, every man must take his pick. For instance, when I was living in Vologda I worked in a lunatic asylum and one of the doctors, a very sensible man he was, said to me: 'Every year more folk go off their chumps.' That's because they've started thinking. They're not used to it, and so off they go. If you're not used to hauling crates on the docks you'll get a rupture, like me; the same with using your head: it can stand just so much thinking and no more."

"The townsfolk are saying too many have taken to reading the Black Book lately," said Natalya, "but Yevgenia Petrovna just laughs at them, says it's all nonsense, the Black Book."

"Alexei!" called Kozhemyakin, leaning out of the window.

When the cross-eyed porter came up to him he asked him good-naturedly:

"Why did you say I ought to grind a barrel-organ?"

The porter blinked and shrugged his shoulders, in no way disconcerted.

"I just said the first thing that came into my head, begging your pardon. I had no right, certainly."

Matvei laughed.

"Oh, I don't mind. You have a right to think what you like and so have I. What were you talking about?"

"About Yevgenia Petrovna," replied the man reluctantly; then, with flashing eye, and in a burst of confidence: "And about Russian folk in general. As I see it, most people are square pegs in round holes and they don't understand one another. By nature this man was cut out to be a publican, and here he is for some crazy reason a monk in a monastery —it's my uncle I have in mind. Or all of a sudden a decent man drinks himself into a pig. Or take the judge I worked for in Penza; it turns out he writes dirty jingles. Fancy that, a judge! Me working for him, my life in his hands, and him spending his time writing jingles of a shady sort. It don't dovetail somehow with his high calling. And there's lots of examples like that. I was even thinking about you. Here you are, a merchant, but you never squeeze anything out of people, live all to yourself, out of everybody's way, not like a merchant at all. A merchant's supposed to ... well ... have a lot of children, for instance, begging your pardon."

"That's all right," said Matvei encouragingly, thinking to himself:

He speaks up boldly, without any fear, must be a good chap.

For the next two days Alexei wore a dejected air, and at the end of that time he approached his master in the yard and, doffing his cap, asked him politely to pay him off.

"What's this?" said Matvei in surprise. "Don't you like working for me?"

"I won't leave without giving notice, but please find somebody to take my place," said Alexei, swinging his cap. "I have no complaint to make, but the place doesn't suit me, begging your pardon." Turning away, he gave a little laugh and said with animation: "It's a dog I need for a master; one who'll show his teeth and make me fight back. That's my nature; it can't be helped: I do like a fight and a quarrel."

"You're a queer bird, brother," said Kozhemyakin, surveying the man's puny body with languid curiosity. "Are you sure you want to leave? You're not exactly a burly fellow; one of these days you'll get in a fight that'll be the end of you."

"Can't be helped, that's my nature," repeated the man with a shrug of his shoulders. "It's dull in this town—Lord, how dull! Not a soul to argue with. You can say to a fellow: 'Heard the news? The tsar has given orders that on Friday next all the crows are to stop cawing,' and all he'll do is blink his lamps and say: 'That so? Does he mind their cawing as much as all that?' Very dull."

"I suppose you're right," agreed Kozhemyakin softly. "That's what my father used to say twenty years ago."

The porter threw him a sharp look, put his hand over his mouth, and gave a polite little cough.

"Fact is, it's dull everywhere. I've been in a dozen provinces, and none of them was any better. Wherever you go the folk are like worms in the graveyard: comes a fresh corpse, they set to and gobble it up; when it's done, they just lie squirming again."

He blew out his yellow cheeks, making his incongruous beard stand on end like a porcupine's quills.

"Yesterday I went to see the suicide."

"The clerk from the Council?"

"Yes. There he was, dead as a doornail, but he had a

happy look on his face, as much as to say: 'I'm dead, brother, and mighty glad of it!' True as I'm standing here. As if he'd done the smartest trick in the world."

"He drank."

The porter stepped back a pace, threw his cap on his head, and said curtly:

"I don't suppose it was from being too happy."

"N-no," agreed Kozhemyakin.

"Everybody wants to have a little fun sometimes; we only live once. That's why I'm setting out to find a livelier place to live in, begging your pardon."

"That's your business. Where are you going?"

Alexei gazed round him as he considered the question.

"I thought of going to Vorgorod to be an actor, but seeing that I've got a rupture and an actor's expected to do a lot of shouting, Yevgenia Petrovna says they won't take me."

"When did she say that?"

"Yesterday."

"Why, do you visit her?" asked Kozhemyakin in a faint voice.

"Oh, yes, indeed. Such a very clever woman she is; it's a pleasure to listen to her."

"That's true," said Matvei involuntarily. "Ah, well. So it's good-bye to you, brother."

"Good-bye, and thank you," said Alexei, shaking the hand his master held out to him.

I always seem to be saying good-bye to somebody, thought Matvei as he roamed through the orchard. If a man has any spirit at all, he's sure to take himself off. This accursed town of ours!

He closed his eyes for a second and saw his own house with vicious clarity: he knew every chink in the fence, every knot in the floorboards, every crack in the walls, the height of every tree in the orchard, the length of every new branch that had sprouted during the summer. He felt

that he knew even the number of hairs in Shakir's beard, and he certainly knew everything his workmen were capable of saying.

Formerly he had known all his own thoughts; they had been few, haphazard and disconnected; they had come to him quietly and left him sadly, without disturbing his tranquillity or demanding anything of him; they had, in fact, acted as a soporific. Now such thoughts were gone, and gone for good. The new ones that had taken their place came to him in a long chain, each one drawing others after it, and each giving off quivering rays in every direction.

I'll go and tell her she has put me in a muddle I'll never get out of, he said to himself.

On Sunday evening he found himself at the entrance to the neat house of the paymaster, debating whether he should go to the front door or through the yard to the kitchen entrance.

He had often seen Matushkin at the treasury office. He was an austere, clean-shaven man with a cruel mouth. He spoke with a harsh brusqueness and looked people straight in the eye as he sized them up.

He'll probably be indignant if I enter by the front door, thought Kozhemyakin glumly.

His heart beat faster as he heard Boris's voice coming from the other side of the fence, the top of which was bristling with nails. He longed to scale it and join the lively little fellow.

He squatted down in front of a crack and called to the child, but scarcely had he done so when the latch was lifted and Yevgenia Petrovna herself stepped out. Kozhemyakin got up, took off his cap, and bowed his head.

"Good-evening," he heard her say in a friendly voice, and he felt a hot hand grasp his own tightly. "Why have you been so long in coming?"

As if nothing had happened! he wanted to exclaim.

"I saw you from the window. Come into the garden and meet my landlady. She's paralyzed, as perhaps you know."

"So am I," he murmured. "I was sure I could never step inside."

The familiar smile slid over her face.

"Afraid of the paymaster? He's gone off on a long holiday. Look who's here, Boris!"

Boris jumped out of some bushes, gave a happy whoop, threw himself on the visitor, and clung to him like a burr.

"Forgot all about me!" said Matvei in a hollow voice, afraid of breaking down.

"Oh, no, Uncle Matvei! Honest I didn't!"

"It's been two weeks since you—"

"Eleven days," corrected Yevgenia Petrovna.

She's counted them, he said to himself joyfully.

"I've been so busy!" cried Boris.

Matvei caught a glimpse of Vanya Khryapov's tow head.

"The rope-maker's come!"

"Hullo! Hullo!" cried curly-headed Lyuba, waving a muddy hand at him.

"And this is Varvara Dmitrievna."

He saw the emaciated form of a tiny woman half-reclining in a big wicker chair. She held out a childlike hand.

"I'm glad to see you," she said in a voice that seemed to come from afar.

"Wait, Aunt Varvara, first we'll show him—" began Boris in a business-like tone.

"Run along, Boris!"

Yevgenia Petrovna disappeared among the trees together with her son. Kozhemyakin felt she had gone away on purpose, and he drew a deep breath.

"Yevgenia Petrovna has told me so many nice things about you!"

He smiled self-consciously and gazed into the woman's enormous eyes set in a face that was almost transparent.

How ill she looks! he thought.

Her words fell slowly, like autumn leaves on a quiet day, but it was pleasant to listen to them. He replied in monosyllables as he searched his memory for all he had ever heard about her: at one time there had been plentiful and malicious gossip. On first coming to this town she had tried to make friends with everybody. Her husband had been so jealous that he had taken to drink and then got himself a mistress. The disgrace of it had driven her into seclusion, and now it was as if she had died: nobody so much as mentioned her name any more.

Yevgenia came back humming to herself and fanning her face with a burdock leaf.

"Has the forest fire caused much destruction?"

"I haven't heard. It's still burning."

"Was it really the peasants who set fire to it?" she asked, sitting at the feet of her landlady.

"Probably. The woods were neglected, full of fallen timber and underbrush. The fire has lots to feed on."

"The peasants will have no fuel next winter."

"Forests perish and people perish," mused the landlady softly.

"Are you thinking of that suicide?"

"Not only; of all the people here."

They spoke of gloomy things, but in a way that was not depressing; he even found a curious pleasure in listening to them.

The skin at the sick woman's temples was almost blue, there were dark circles under her eyes, there was a throbbing in her neck just below the ear, and everything about her conveyed the impression that she was living out her last days.

If Yevgenia goes on living here she'll become like her, thought Kozhemyakin, and the thought made him start.

The attention with which the landlady listened to him put him as much at his ease as he had been in the old days, when, alone with Yevgenia, he had forgotten that she was

a woman. They were sitting in the shade of two enormous lime-trees whose spreading boughs formed a green canopy over the garden, hiding the sooty sky.

"Alexei is leaving me," Matvei informed Yevgenia.

"It was I who advised him to," she said, covering her face with the burdock leaf so that only her eyes could be seen. "Let him go away to a big town, life has more meaning there. You, too, ought to go away from here."

"What would happen if everybody went away?" he said with a little laugh. "Somebody's got to stay."

"But why you?"

"Just because. I wouldn't fit in a big town. I'm too shy."

And he told them that on his first visit to Vorgorod he had made the acquaintance of some men in the tavern who had urged him to play cards with them. Lacking the courage to refuse, he had taken his place at the table, but no sooner had he done so than an old tapster called him out into the corridor and told him the men were card-sharpers and would be sure to clean out his pockets. The old man offered to lock him up in an empty room and tell the others he had been suddenly called away on business. For three hours he had been locked up, and during this time someone had stolen the feather pillows from the bed in his own room. Whenever he went out he felt that all the citizens of Vorgorod were his arch-enemies: a house-painter had splashed green paint on him, and the merchants to whom he had brought goods made sport of him for being so young and had forced wine on him until he was drunk.

"I don't even dare tell you what happened after that," he acknowledged shamefacedly, avoiding the women's eyes. "You might have thought I was a pagan they were trying to convert to the true faith, only not with holy water, but filthy fire-water."

A dark flush spread over the sick woman's pale face.

"Why is it that everybody everywhere tries to force their ways on others?" she said, pushing back her hair with her

little hands. "As soon as someone appears who is the least bit different, people begin gnawing at him and sawing at him, removing anything that gives him individuality."

Yevgenia replied with her usual vehemence:

"They think happiness is to be found in equilibrium, tranquillity, lack of change, and they hate anything that threatens to disturb their peace."

She always says the same thing, thought Matvei. It's like a prayer with her.

It was cosy and quiet here, the voices of the children were gay, he felt happy and at home with these women, but he also felt sorry for them.

Their speech, their gestures, their faces, even their shoes and dresses were different, not the Okurov kind. It was as if the wind had brought seeds from some distant place and scattered them on a waste space cluttered with rubbish and overgrown with weeds, and from these seeds two lovely flowers, alien to this soil, had bloomed for a short while.

Behind everything they said there was a tenderness that sought to excuse people. This was particularly pleasant to hear, and it was this that roused his sympathy.

It was night-time when, somewhat reconciled to his fate, he went home.

So you're out to disturb the peace? Well, you've certainly disturbed mine, he thought sadly. What am I to do now?

He began to make frequent visits to the paymaster's house and spent much time there. If Yevgenia was not at home he would pour out his heart to the sick landlady: his life had been upset, he could not go on living in the old way and he did not know how to live in any other. One day he told her he would probably take to drink.

"Don't think of it!" she had cried out, blinking her dying eyes in fear. "It's only because you have at last grown up and your eyes have not yet become used to the light."

He disliked what she said, it sounded empty, sugary, unpleasant, superfluous. He had only wanted her to convey

his mood to Yevgenia, who, he felt, was avoiding him, since she was never at home when he came.

He dared not speak to her of love again, but he wanted to be alone with her once more so that they could say something final, something conclusive. But she did not give him the opportunity.

One day, meeting him at the gate, she announced without any warning:

"In three days I am leaving."

She said it in a loud, bold voice, her eyes dark, her lips curved in a disagreeable smile.

He went cold. He stood there stunned, unable to utter a word.

"Come, let's go out to the fields," she said, taking his arm.

As they walked she pressed his elbow to her side and said quietly:

"My great big boy! I'm as sorry for you as I would be for a brother or a son. . . ."

"Yevgenia!" he murmured. "What am I to do?"

"My decision was determined not by thoughts of myself but of you; I don't want to deceive you."

He glanced into her face and scarcely recognized her, so close she seemed to him. He could scarcely breathe and he felt his heart melt and flow through his veins in a hot revivifying stream.

"Darling!" he whispered. "It doesn't matter. I no longer dream of marrying you; that would be absurd. See what marriage has brought your landlady to! I think too much of you for that. What need have you of a dog? And I should be like a dog running at your heels—"

"Don't!" she said, glancing round.

"But there is one thing I ask of you," he said eagerly; "be a good sister to me, do not drop me, do not forget me. Write to me, let me know how you are. . . ."

"Of course I will. You'll meet another woman, someone

better than me," she said, plucking at the collar of her blouse.

He waved his hand deprecatingly.

"I wouldn't wrong another woman. I would always be seeing you in her place and that would be unfair to her, wouldn't it?"

They went on until they came to the site of an ancient Mordovian settlement, now reduced to four mounds covered with turf. It was here the Okurovites buried drunks and suicides. One of the graves had been dug so recently that the grass had not yet had time to cover it; it looked as if the skin had been rubbed off the earth on that spot.

"Let's sit down," she said.

He sat down submissively and took her hand in his, saying as he stroked it:

"Farewell, Yevgenia; farewell, my love!"

"Matvei," she said without withdrawing her hand and allowing her shoulder to touch his, "if you give me some money—"

"As much as you like."

"Not for myself," she put in quickly, pulling her hand away. "I want to buy books with it and send them to you."

When they got back to the town he felt within him a new strength and fortitude that were quietly conquering the agonizing doubts and contradictions Yevgenia had once excited in him.

But at home that night he again fancied that everything she had said in the afternoon was nothing but words, empty words intended to comfort him.

He recalled Markusha's vicious contention:

"It makes no difference what you tell people so long as they leave you in peace."

A cold clamminess came over him, as if the words had imprisoned him in a cellar.

She'll go away and forget all about me. I'll grow as savage as a boar in the forest and die of my misery.

But suddenly the thought struck him that he could bind her to him with money; after all, she was penniless and she had her son to educate.

That's it! he thought with growing confidence. She'll take money and consider herself indebted to me. That's it!

And on the following day he said to her:

"Please let me give you some money, Yevgenia Petrovna."

"Oh, yes," she replied hurriedly: "I have nothing for the road. If you could let me have twenty rubles—"

"For the road! That's nothing," said Matvei sulkily. "I meant for Boris, and . . . in general . . . to live on. . . ."

She straightened up and an angry light flashed in her eyes, but instantly she turned away and replied in a non-committal tone:

"Oh, we'll discuss that later; if ever I am in need of it."

"Won't you take it now?"

"Now?" She considered a moment, and then, in a voice as business-like as if discussing a weighty transaction: "Very well, I'll take twenty-five rubles—not twenty, but twenty-five."

I'm a fool, thought Kozhemyakin, dropping his eyes in confusion. As if a person could buy her! She doesn't even know the value of money.

She went away in the morning, before dawn, in the cold darkness before the town was awake.

Her face was flushed and excited, her eyes had a dry, nervous glitter. In a grey linen dust-coat with a white veil on her head, she fussed about the cart, waving her arms, reminding Matvei of a bird that is late in setting off for the south in the autumn.

Boris, turned out of bed at too early an hour, blinked sleepy eyes and was fretful.

"Why are the horses so little?" he complained to Shakir.

"All cattle here are little," said Shakir sadly.

"We won't get anywhere with such horses. They're just dogs dressed up like horses."

Natalya bustled about the yard wiping her swollen eyes.

"Don't forget the cakes, dear," she said to Yevgenia Petrovna. "They're in the bag under the seat."

Shakir bobbed his shaven head as he tied the old leather trunk to the back of the cart. Beside him laboured a young carter whose broad face was thickly sprinkled with freckles.

Kozhemyakin stood at the gate stroking Boris's hair and saying to him:

"Don't forget us. Write to me, d'you hear? Tell me all about Mamma . . . and yourself. You won't forget?"

"Of course not," replied the child sullenly.

The paymaster's wife thrust a tousled head through the window and slowly mouthed some bloodless words:

"Stay and have breakfast with me, Matvei Savelyevich."

"Thank you," he muttered, his eyes following Yevgenia.

She was chattering unnecessarily, her eyes roved here and there in apprehension, or perhaps in confusion, and her flurried movements again reminded Matvei of a bird, this time in a cage with an open door, which hops about eyeing its freedom, unable to make up its mind to fly away for fear the open door may be only a trap.

He pitied her.

All alone. Going off like this . . . all alone.

"Ready!" announced Shakir.

Yevgenia Petrovna went up to Matvei and lifted her veil.

"Well . . .?" she said, and, seizing his arm, drew him after her into the house, murmuring as she went: "First I must say good-bye to Varvara Dmitrievna, and to Lyuba; she's asleep."

Matvei felt that this was not what she wanted to say, but he let her run on.

He stood waiting in the hall, listening to the kisses and sniffling coming from inside the room and seeing in his mind's eye a sweep of land with bumps of hills and bristling woods on it, and a valley filled with dark trees between which coiled a cold river, and, cutting through the whole scene, an endless dusty road.

"Farewell, dear friend."

She put firm hands on his shoulders and gazed at him with wet and shining eyes. She began to speak hurried words of comfort, but he embraced her and kissed her on cheeks and forehead and replied without hearing what she said:

"Don't forget me; in the name of all that's holy, don't forget me; after all, I'm a human being."

Then, standing in the porch, he jealously watched her kiss Shakir as she had kissed him and saw the Tatar stamp his feet like a horse and press his shaven head against her shoulder as he cried:

"You're too good—too good!"

Natalya ran up crying, and the three of them put their arms round one another and did a sort of awkward dance.

Everybody loves her, thought Matvei.

"Hurry up!" cried Boris, jumping into the cart. "Uncle Matvei! Come here!"

He went to the boy.

"Write to me, please do," he said to him wearily.

"I will; big, long letters."

The child patted him on cheeks and ears and sniffed to keep from crying, but the tears rolled down and hung on his chin.

They drove off in a cloud of dust, the cart bumping and creaking over the uneven road. Above the cart waved a white veil and Yevgenia's hand, and the paymaster's wife waved a handkerchief from the window.

The dogs ran out into the road and charged after the horses, stretching their bodies like rubber.

"So she's gone, our dear guest," said the paymaster's wife, blowing her nose. "Come and have breakfast with me, Matvei Savelyevich, and we'll talk about her."

Matvei started.

"Thank you. Presently," he murmured and set out after the cart.

He walked slowly, his eyes glued to the road ahead as if stalking something that lured him on irresistibly, and before he knew it he was outside the town.

The object of his focus was a little dark spot in a cloud of dust that bounced ahead, and every time it disappeared behind a tree or a barn his heart sank. At last it climbed the final hill, swayed over the crest, and was gone.

Kozhemyakin came to a halt and took off his cap.

Farewell, Yevgenia Petrovna.

An hour before he would not have dared to imagine what would become of him when she left and, behold, she was gone! It was very sad, but he had experienced more painful and poignant sensations.

Alarmed at discovering it was less painful than he had expected, he started out in the same direction, walking faster and searching his heart.

The last few days have worn me out, he thought as if in self-justification. I kept waiting for it, and now that it's over, it's almost a relief. Like when somebody dies; it's unbearable as long as the body's in the house, but once it's buried it's a relief.

White birches, already sprinkled with yellow leaves, swayed distinctly in the clear air of the autumn morning, suggesting altar candles; stunted horses bobbed their heads as they walked slowly down the furrows; blue and red peasants followed them in silence, bending over dry, brown soil, and in the foot-worn hollows on either side of the road gleamed pale yellow and mauve flowers. Stiff immortelles sprang out of the dusty grass, and as Matvei looked at them he remembered her words:

"One must love; then one will feel neither fear nor loneliness. One must love."

He walked as far as the hill over which the cart had disappeared and stood there gazing with moist eyes at the dark blue wall of the forest cloven by the road, then cast his eyes about him: a bright track of river wound over the

uneven fields, looping about as if uncertain where to go; the soil was like a smudged draught-board with its squares all run together; a wood at the rim of the fields propped up the empty sky; the season's last martins were darting like lightning through the air; a faint chirping of grasshoppers could be heard, and from the ploughed furrows came weary sighs:

"Ah, me! Ah, me!"

Kozhemyakin was bereft of all desire; his chest was as empty as the inside of a bell, in which his heart hung like the clapper, cold and heavy.

In the distance stretched the town, thrusting its crosses up into the bright emptiness of the sky. He heard the muted ringing of bells, the dull hammering of coopers whose busy season had come (it was now time to salt cabbage and mushrooms for the winter).

The women have a better time of it, Matvei thought enviously. They have all sorts of jobs to keep them busy ... and babies to look after...

A pallid autumn sun rose above Chernoramensky Wood and little black dots of people came along the road, leaping and scurrying like mice escaping from a dark hole.

The town assumed innumerable tints and colours. Kozhemyakin studied the toy-like houses: each had its orchard and fence, but each was separated from all others by a deep gulf: the emptiness encircling it.

He felt himself filled with a compassion that swelled his breast to breaking-point and forced tears to his eyes. But his compassion was mixed with resentment. He longed to rush back to the town, take up his stand in the marketplace where all could see him, and cry out to the passers-by:

"Dear people, dear unfortunate people! Unutterable is the compassion I feel for you, whom everybody abandons, everybody condemns, nobody loves and nobody befriends. Ah, my poor, beloved people!"

For some time he went on ruminating in this manner, then he wiped his eyes with his fist and put an end to sentimentalizing by saying to himself:

Nobody would listen to me, and if they did it would only be to laugh at me, nothing more.

And he hung his head, feeling a stranger even to himself.

PART THREE

Twice the church-bell rang; the window-panes shook, the night-watchman woke up, his rattle clicked languidly, and the air was stirred as if someone had breathed a sigh and run a soft hand caressingly over the trees in the orchard.

With an effort Kozhemyakin lifted his grey head, illuminated by the green lamp, shaded his eyes with his hand and looked at the clock. It was a quarter to three.

The silence of the moonless night, broken by the ringing of the bell, held itself alert for a moment like an awakened cat, then settled down again on the earth.

The old man drew a deep breath, dipped his pen in the ink-pot, and bent over the table to inscribe painstakingly the following words on the white sheet of his notebook:

"As these entries and the days of my life draw to a close, this is what I would say to you, my distant friend: it is not death that I find bitter and frightening, it is this lonely, dismal life. How is it that the earth is so teeming with people and yet I am living among them as if there was no I at all? I have lived feeding on thoughts of myself as a little chicken feeds on its shell, but never have I found the strength to break through the shell. As I ponder these thoughts they seem happy ones to me, thoughts nobody knows and everybody needs, but now that I have written

them down they stare back at me from the paper like pug-nosed savages, all alike, half-blind, with sore eyes, inflamed and running."

Having penned these lines, he scrutinized them narrowly, aware that again his ideas had been clipped and bleached by merely putting them into words, and he fell to pondering on the mysterious meaning of words. Sometimes, quite unexpectedly, they revealed to him vast depths of meaning and curious inter-relationships.

He remembered once finding the word "ire" juxtaposed to the word "fire," and their similarity had greatly impressed him.

Ire, he had said to himself, is born of fire. Only a person who has fire in his heart can feel ire. Have I ever felt it? Never. Because there is no fire in me, my heart is cold, and so all my words and thoughts are bloodless, lifeless. . . .

A mouse kept scratching at the floor behind the wardrobe. Kozhemyakin knew this mouse: at night it would come scampering out, a little grey ball with black buttons for eyes, and sit in the middle of the floor cleaning its pointed face with its paws.

On this particular night its scratching fell unpleasantly on the silence of his soul.

"Shoo! Be off with you!" he said softly.

He struggled to his feet and suddenly felt faint; his whole body went limp, his muscles refused to obey him and his blood, thick and sluggish, seemed about to stop coursing through his veins.

Sickness and giddiness turned his thoughts into something sticky and amorphous. Holding on to the wall, he made his way to the window, pushed open the shutters, and collapsed on the window-sill.

Myriads of golden stars trembled in the black sky and the world was as still as if it had stopped whirling through space

and was hanging motionless, like the pendulum of a broken clock.

And in this stillness, serene as the water at the bottom of a deep well, everything—the trees, the clusters of houses, the fire-tower and church belfry sticking up like two thick fingers—seemed garbed in the funereal robes of a monk.

A dog, roused by a flea-bite or a bad dream, yelped sleepily, the grass rustled, a hedgehog clicked its teeth three times as it scurried past, but none of these needless sounds broke the stillness of the hot night, which was permeated with the cloying sweetness of lime blossom.

From somewhere close at hand came the dry clack of the watchman's rattle, the drag of tired feet over the ground, and the mutter of a senile voice:

"Ah, Lord, Lord!"

He's over eighty years old, our watchman, thought Kozhemyakin, and yet he goes on guarding the peace, keeping people from harm in the night. He thinks he can and he'll go on doing it till the hour of his death.

Kozhemyakin closed his eyes in resignation.

And some fine night my own hour will come.

The horror of the thought pricked his heart, making it beat more strongly and evenly. He knitted his brows stubbornly, went over to the bed, lay down and began reading through his notes, to see if there were not something of importance he had omitted.

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"Three weeks have passed since she left, and my captive soul yearns for her more than ever; there's nothing I want to see, nothing I want to think of but her. In the day-time I am tortured by an unspeakable longing, and at night I am a prey to jealousy and lustful visions, I roam through the yard and the orchard in search of some trace of her footsteps, I call to mind the wise things she said and I see her smiling face, her image haunts me and is driving me mad.

I spend hours chopping wood, I walk through the fields until I am ready to drop, but nothing avails. At night I go up into the attic and lie on her bed, I weep, I burn with desire, I am consumed with fury. You viper! You have imbedded yourself in my heart and nothing will ever free me of you! You trifled with me—can you deny it?—and why should you have done so if you had no need of me? No doubt someone else is looking at you with ardent eyes now, and you smile back at him, luring him on, making him burst into flames that nothing can quench. I have always despised the *skoptsy*,* but now I think that perhaps they alone have found the way of protecting a man from the frenzy of the flesh that makes him worse than a mad dog. If only once I could enjoy the sweet tortures of love sleeping by your side, Yevgenia darling, I would gladly never wake up, would joyfully die, having first pressed endless kisses on your beloved feet."

After reading this passage Kozhemyakin gave a little sigh, pushed up his glasses, and said to himself as if criticizing someone else:

There's less love than resentment here. Petty... petty ... a mean little soul....

Turning over several pages at once, he went on reading:

"This morning I found among the pages of my prayer-book the one short letter she sent me. She wrote:

" 'Here we are in Vorgorod. After resting for two days we shall take the boat down this lovely river.'

"I imagined the broad grey-blue ribbon of the river stretching into the distance, vanishing among the hills and meadows as if flowing down into the centre of the earth, and I visualized the boat as a little one that bounced about on the water like the mail cart over the bumpy road, and there was nobody in the boat but a grave woman and a curly-headed little boy, both of them no bigger than flies.

* The *skoptsy*–a religious sect that practised castration.–*Tr.*

She said a person ought to live in this wretched town, among all these stupid people, and try to bring them benefit, but she herself went away. She showed up Markusha when she argued with him, but what he said was the truth, the irrefutable truth: 'Every man for himself.'

"Once more I have taken to going to church. It is good to be there—lots of people about you, and yet you are all alone among them, like God is alone high up above the world and its people. And it is good that the new priest Father Alexander does not preach sermons but just comes out holding the cross and smiling at everybody as if promising to say something nice to them; they sent him here from Vorgorod as a penance for something he did. Before Father Pavel died he used to preach sermons every Sunday, they bored everybody to death and made them angry: time to go home for dinner, and here they were standing up and being told what ungodly lives they led. But this priest has a sense of proportion in words and time, and he reads the service in a soft soulful voice, his face is ugly, but kind and gentle, and one of his cheeks twitches, which makes him look as if he was winking at you, as much as to say: Just a second and I'll show you a trick—just a second! You keep looking at him and waiting for him to do or say something to please everybody, and it is very nice just standing there in a dark corner waiting for something amusing to happen."

"All night long, until the very dawn, I roamed the fields and thought of what Yevgenia had said about lonely little towns like ours; she said there were more than eight hundred of them scattered over the earth, not even knowing of each other's existence; perhaps in each one of them there is a madman like me who roams the fields all night and is sick of life. I wonder what God thinks about these towns and men like me? What is our excuse for being alive?

"There was a full moon, by midnight the earth had clothed itself in hoarfrost and everything was bright and silvery. The sky at dawn was clear and cloudless, and it was soothing to the eyes and soul to see the town covered with pink snow and smoke from the chimneys rising like incense from innumerable censers. Again I remembered her words: that the earth was a temple and life was worship. Good words, and in the early morning before people are awake they ring true, but life in the daytime gives the lie to them. Life is a market-place, not a temple, and it is haggling and fighting that goes on, not worship!

"Sometimes I wish I was invisible and could go from house to house, peering in at each family, seeing what they do, hearing what they say, finding out what they live in expectation of. Perhaps they live like me, without knowing why, perhaps life is just as much a puzzle to them as it is to me and their thoughts are just as pointless.

"All sorts of things take place in our town, sad things, funny things, but I have no wish to write them all down. All sorts of rubbish floats on the surface of the river. Let it. As for what goes on deep down in the depths, nobody knows. For instance, the Stoyakins' three-year-old baby drank kerosene; the cooper Migunov's sister ran away; the shopkeeper Loktyev hit his wife over the head so hard that she went mad, lost her memory and the power of speech. At a wedding-party at the Titov's everybody got drunk and went to bed in all sorts of places. In the morning Yakov Titov woke up and found the sister of his bride lying beside him, he shook her and she cried out: 'Where's my husband?' It turns out her husband was lying in the hall with the matchmaker. They started shouting, fighting, crying and then they began drinking all over again, even the women get drunk at weddings. But why should one remember all these things? What good can it do? None at all."

"This morning Shakir found me moping and tried to cheer me up, good soul. 'She's not the only woman in the world,' he said. She is not, of course, from the Tatar way of looking at it, but with us it is different, for us it seems to have been decreed that a man is to have only one true love which sticks to him like his shadow. He went on talking to me in his broken words: 'You're losing your head, master; how can you go on living without a head, and who wants your head? You love too little, you must love another woman, then you will forget yourself and all will be well.' Shakir told me how good Father Vitaly had been to him, and even though he is only a Tatar he shed a tear for the poor priest who drank himself to death. The good Father used to appear in the street, half-naked and with bloodshot eyes, and he would stop people to say to them:

" 'But Dioskor was a Jew! Damn you, why didn't you tell me? Why did you hide it from me? I am Dioskor; isn't my name Dioskurov? You knew that! And you have known it all along!'

"In his madness he would throw himself on people like a wild beast. A good man gone to the dogs. Why is it that so many good people live such bad lives and die such terrible deaths? Ah, me! We are a miserable lot!"

"It is a wicked night, the wind is howling, making me feel more wretched than ever, and the clouds are racing past as if trying to get away from this dismal earth, there is the tiniest crescent of a moon; when it is not blotted out by clouds, it glistens feebly, like a bit of broken bottle at the bottom of a rubbish-heap."

"October has come. It is cold, dry autumn, the orchard is strewn with dead leaves and the earth rings like iron when you walk on it. A pious old man has put in an appearance in our town, he gathers people together and preaches to them about their souls. Natalya went to listen

to him today and now she is sitting in the kitchen and crying and the only thing we can get out of her is: 'I'm so afraid!' She has got disgustingly fat, she can barely breathe for fat, but she goes on eating like a pig. Not a word from Yevgenia. She has forgotten me."

"The preacher lives with the Sychugovs. He is a little old man, his body is no bigger than a boy's, and he is very ancient, his head is entirely bald except for a thin fringe of white hair stretching from ear to ear. His ears are sharp and stick up like a mouse's, his nose is long and curved and his mouth is hidden by a yellow beard and moustache. His eyes, too, are so sunken that you would not know they were there but for the tears that keep flowing down his brown cheeks. He is ugly, speaks indistinctly and with difficulty, has a habit of laying his hands on the table and wriggling his crooked claw-like fingers as if he was plucking the strings of a *gusli.* They gave him a seat in the corner under the icons, and the light of the blue glass icon-lamp falling on his bald head gave him a weird look.

"He spoke about the soul, said we ought to love it and cherish it, but instead we clip its wings and keep it from soaring up to Christ. The first and bitterest enemy of the soul is the flesh, the soul in the flesh is like a prisoner in jail, a man has two natures, and therein lies his eternal suffering. The flesh is of the devil, the soul is of God, the devil wants the soul to be part and parcel of all man's sins of the flesh, but a man ought not to allow this. So far so good, but further on everything he said was mixed up and unconvincing. Somebody asked him how a man could conquer the flesh, and he said: 'Give rein to the flesh and it will consume itself, leaving the soul free to worship God in peace and purity.'

"Next to him sat a fat man who had brought him here, I seem to have seen him somewhere before, he has ugly eyes that stick out like a crab's and turn hideously from

side to side, his face is as round and greasy as a pancake. From time to time he explained what the old man meant, and he always did it impatiently: 'Go against all worldly commandments for the salvation of your soul,' he said. He snorts and puffs out his cheeks angrily when he speaks and he has a gruff voice that sounds familiar. There was a one-eyed man there who said to him:

" 'In other words, without sin, there's no repentance, and without repentance there's no salvation—is that it? We've heard that before.'

"Everybody began hushing him, and the fat man made no answer. Then everybody began speculating on where the soul was located, some said in the heart, others in the brain, inside the skull. And again the one-eyed man said mockingly:

" 'Nobody knows where it is or what it is, and yet you say only the soul counts!'

"It was strange to hear him talk like that and nobody paid any attention to him. The old man was falling asleep and his companion shook him roughly.

" 'Here, you! Where's the soul?' he said.

"The old man was so frightened that he sat trembling and blubbering for a few moments before he could stutter: 'The soul's lodged in the flesh on trial.' Everybody was satisfied with this answer and asked no more questions. As I sat listening and watching the people I had the feeling that I had been through all this once before, perhaps in a dream.

"There was another man there, tall and thin as a pole, with an amusing button of a nose, clear eyes, a big forehead, a bushy moustache and a face too small for his body. He stood without speaking, smiling round at everybody as if they were all his friends; he joined me as I was walking home. It turns out he's the cousin of Khryapov's daughter-in-law, the one who got drowned when the boat caught fire, his name is Semyon Drozdov, and I found him

amusing and went to the tavern with him for a glass of tea. There we found one-eyed Tiunov, son of the midwife and matchmaker Living Water. He is a vagabond and a good-for-nothing and likes to talk boldly; Drozdov got into an argument with him.

" 'It's a good thing people are searching for their souls, we've lived too long without them,' said Drozdov.

"Tiunov wound his beard round his finger and grinned.

" 'All that talk's like gold buttons on a beggar's rags, like a velvet cap on an empty head,' he said. 'They set out to watch their flocks, forgetting that they don't have any. They ought to stop swilling vodka and hitting their wives and children with the first thing that comes to hand before they start searching for their souls.'

" 'No,' said Drozdov, 'a man can't live right until he's sure about his soul.'

" 'Those preachers ought to be thrown out on their ears,' went on Tiunov. 'They gobble up everything they can lay their hands on themselves and tell others not to.'

" 'Not this old man. He says do what you like.'

"Tiunov half rose in his chair and looked as if he wanted to bite somebody.

" 'We know that without him telling us. But you tell me what's the main thing, the thing nobody—me or anybody else—can do without—'

" 'The soul, that's the main thing.'

"Tiunov was beside himself. He poked a dirty finger in Drozdov's face and shouted at the top of his voice:

" 'You'll rot in the mud picking your noses before you'll ever find that soul of yours! You're not worth a soul yet. You can't reap what you've never sown. While you're searching for your soul you choke each other to death, it's as dangerous to live among you as among wild beasts, a man's as alone on this earth as if he was standing on a tussock in a dark bog with water all around. Everybody's alone and lost and homeless and full of fear. It'd be better

if you found each other before you set out looking for your souls; you've got to hold out your hands to each other and grip them tight.'

"He said this last calmly but he seemed to be still shouting. I was afraid the men would fall on him (there were some fifteen in the tap-room, all of them grim fellows) but they just sat listening to him as if what he said did not apply to them at all. I was greatly surprised and began to see people, especially the settlement folk, in a different light.

"I cannot get that old man out of my head: to be so old and foolish, and yet to care about others and try to teach them what they ought to do! Most men, even in the prime of life, full of strength and with clear minds, turn their backs on their fellow-men so as to enjoy life undisturbed.

"Drozdov came home to spend the night with me because the Khryapovs lock their gate at eight o'clock and it was eleven when we left the tavern, he is still living with me."

"Drozdov took the clock apart and could not put it together again, he said a three-sided wheel was missing but who ever heard of a three-sided wheel? He is very amusing, he keeps talking about buried treasure and says he knows how to find it because he knows a lot of potent charms, but I suppose he is just bluffing. It turns out that people from other parts are often more lively and amusing than our own folk. Take our new yard porter, Maxim: he comes from Yaroslavl and has a good head on his shoulders, he is exceptionally good-looking—auburn hair, blue eyes, dark eyebrows, and a mouth as small and sweet as a woman's—and he is a good workman, never hurries, but is thorough and works with gusto, as if a job was a meal. First he views a task from all sides, thinking out the best way to set about it. Shakir can't praise him enough, he says he is not like other folk, not like a Russian. It hurts to hear him say this, and I don't think much of that Maxim. He has a lot

of books, he keeps them in a black trunk which is always locked, and in the evening he reads to us. Not long ago he read a very touching story about a woman who was struck down by a great love and died of it, like Pelageya, and it would be a good thing if all women did the same.

"Drozdov talks a lot about women, though often I cannot understand him. He and Maxim are always quarrelling, and to everything he says Maxim replies: 'That's a lie!' Drozdov claims to be the illegitimate son of a count his mother took up with.

"Maxim would make a good preacher; young as he is, he is very exacting.

"'I have no use for people,' he once said. 'They are lazy, all they want to do is lounge about, especially in winter, they have no love for labour and that is why they are so restless. If they wag their tongues, it is to hide their shortcomings, and if they hold their tongues it is because there is nothing they believe in. The core of them is pithy, and it is no use setting up all sorts of authorities to watch over them, if goodness does not come from inside, it cannot be forced on them from outside. They are a faithless, unreliable lot.'

"He has tramped the land from end to end, and what he says bears out what I myself have observed in people. They are a puzzle, and all of them are bored to death. What is the reason? Maxim says it comes of their foolishness. I wonder. After all, a fool enjoys life himself and furnishes amusement to others."

"I asked Drozdov what he does for a living.

"'I just go about looking for good people, and when I find them I stick to them,' he said. 'Take you, for instance: I watched you sitting there as if in a dream while that old man was talking and I instantly saw you were not one of the greedy ones and didn't ask anything for yourself. So here I am, sticking to you.'

"Let him; he is a good-hearted chap but too eager: he is always undertaking things he cannot carry through. He undertook to mend the lock on the barn door and after breaking the mechanism he threw it away, saying: 'It is not a safety-lock.' No one had ever said it was. When Shakir began railing at him for what he had done, he looked very downcast, blinked his eyes, shrugged his shoulders, and smiled as meekly as a saint. Shakir cannot stand him and once he said to me:

"'I am afraid of such people. They are always in the way, they poke their noses everywhere, they try anything just to find out. Very harmful, such people.'

"Natalya is trying hard to fatten him, but he eats hardly anything, at every meal he talks in a high-pitched voice without stopping. At breakfast yesterday he shocked Maxim by saying:

"'Seems to me you're an illegitimate child too.'

"'That's a lie. My mother and father were married.'

"'That,' said Drozdov, 'means nothing. A young lady goes walking down the street, she is spied by a fine gentleman, he invites her to join him, and there you are! A husband means nothing at such a moment. Only the woman counts. She lives by her instincts. She is like the earth: it makes no difference to her where the seed comes from so long as it comes. That is what she was made for. Give the earth its due and a fig for the how and the why of it! Sometimes a woman goes searching all her life for the man fated to be hers, and perhaps she never finds him, and then she is doomed.'

"His eyes grow deep and dark when he talks of women, his voice drops to a whisper and he hunches up his shoulders as if he was afraid.

"'A woman can have as many as twenty or more souls inside her, and that's why she's so restless, always wandering about. It's hard to understand a woman.'

"Maxim wrinkled up his nose.

"'It's a lie, what you say,' he barked.

"'Oh, no it's not. Where do babies come from? The women. Well, then, who gives them their souls? See? Some women have as many as twenty babies, so they must have twenty souls inside them. And if they give birth to only two babies, the rest of the souls are left inside begging to be born in the flesh and the woman has a feeling her husband cannot do this for them, so she goes against him. Some call it whoring, but it's nothing of the sort if you look at it from the point of view of her vocation.'

"He loves to talk about nothing so much as women and the soul, and it is interesting to listen to him even if much that he says is not clear. I never before heard anyone speak about women like that, with what seems to be respect, even awe, and yet loosely.

"Drozdov told me about a certain merchant's wife who pressed him to help her poison her father-in-law:

"'Her father-in-law was a crippled old man who went about the house in a wheel-chair with the wheels wrapped up in cloths. He'd go rolling about, jerking his head and barking at everybody (it was as quiet as a grave in their house). At the time I'm talking about I was fifteen years old and a sort of house-boy to the old fellow. I tidied up his room and read his letters to him, and he kept a sharp eye on me, would even shout at me: "Why don't you listen to me, you fool? I'm trying to make a man of you!" So I listened to him; why not? His son was a meek creature; he was full of spite and bullied his wife, but he never talked back to his father. The old man would run him down and pitch into him and Kirillo (that was the son's name) would just stand and stare at the floor and say: "Yes, Father; no, Father." He used to drink in secret—not enough to be a real drunkard, just enough to get away from the wretched life he led. His wife came from the poorer sort of townsfolk, but she was a pretty woman and a spirited one. She was always getting fancies in her head.

"'Soon she began making up to me, once she treated me to sweets, another time she made eyes at me—and everybody knows what's on a boy's mind at that age. I was drawn to her like grass to the sun. Her laugh was enough to make a dead stone go rolling to her feet, let alone a creature with a heart in his breast. Things went on like that for about three months without any noticeable change, but all the while they were coming to a head. One day she walked straight up to me, put her arms round me, and kissed me.

"'"You're such a good boy, Senya," she said, "so honest, surely you can see what's going on here. I'm so unhappy! Help me, dear. Kirillo drinks on the sly and he'll put me in my grave even before the old man dies. Help me, please help me. Was I made to live such a life?"

"'It was all true what she said; she really didn't deserve such a life. I wanted to help her, I pitied her, but I was frightened. "Wait a while," I said. She made me swear by the Smolensk Virgin that I would never tell, but still she must have been afraid I'd tell the old man what she had asked me to do because one day she put arsenic in my raspberry tart. I thought it had an odd taste while I was eating it, and as soon as it was gone—Lord! how I was taken! I was too afraid to say anything for a bit, then I told them they'd better take me to the hospital. They did, and I began to get better, and by the evening of the fifth day I was almost well except for the weakness and the brown spots all over me. They asked me how it had happened and where it had happened and all sorts of things, but I lied to them—said I had made a mistake, thought I was sprinkling sugar on my tart.

"'As I was lying there she suddenly came in. Her face was white—almost blue—her eyes were glittering, she frowned and came up to me as if she was being pulled on a chain. She sat down on my cot. "Here," she said, "I've

brought you a treat," and made some other remarks, and then she whispered:

"'"Did you tell them it was me?"

"'"Of course not," I said. "Didn't I swear on the image?"

"'"Don't lie!" she says. "I can tell by your eyes! But it's no use. You can't prove it."

" 'I was hurt at her saying this.'

"'"Go away," I said. "I don't want to have anything more to do with you if you don't trust me."

"'And I told her what I had told them. She began to cry softly.

"'"Mother of God!" she said, "How afraid I was you'd tell them. Thank you, dear," she said. "May the Blessed Virgin reward you, and as for that monster, I'll manage him without your help; I know now how to do it—a little at a time and not in one dose." (She meant the arsenic.)

"'She slipped three green bank-notes into my hand and kissed me on the forehead.

"'"Please go away," she said, "because if anything happens you'll know who did it and might let a word drop by chance; do go away, I beg you."

" 'I did, of course—why not? One town's as good as another to me, and I hadn't the heart to refuse her. I left and went to Savatma.'

"'And what happened after that?' I asked.

"'I don't know,' he said.

" 'Did she poison her father-in-law?'

"'I never heard. I'm like that: once I've left a place, I lose all interest in it.'

"As I listened to him I could not decide what was good and what was bad. I had heard many similar stories. Wherever you turn there are people who are not really bad, who are even kind-hearted and only too glad to do someone a good turn, but it is always at the expense of a third party.

"Drozdov knows how to tell a story and enjoys doing

it. Everything seems simple and natural when he tells it and he never judges people; speaks of them as if they were dead."

"At mass today I had the feeling that Father Alexander was looking at me in a particularly friendly way. I waited for him in the porch and when he came over and blessed me I asked him if I might come and see him some time. He seized me by the coat sleeve and said hurriedly:

" 'Whenever you like; I shall be only too glad to see you.'

"And he drew me after him. He walks quickly, with short steps, his fur coat is worn and ill-fitting, anyone can see it was not made for him. He is young, thin and excitable, when we got to his house he rushed about in a manner unbefitting his station, catching his foot in chairs and sweeping objects off tables with the sleeve of his cassock as he dashed from one room to another, saying under his breath:

" 'Dear me, how clumsy I am! Forgive me!'

"One cheek twitches, his fine hair forms a cloud round his head, his eyes are big and grey and mostly fixed on the ceiling, a smile keeps flitting across his lean face, and he passes a thin hand over his cheeks from time to time as if to wipe it off. He looks quite different from the priest who reads the church service—slyer perhaps, or more foolish; in general he behaves as if he had had a bad fright, and as if he felt guilty towards me and his wife. She is older and steadier than he, wears spectacles, has a flat chest and no eyebrows, and struts about like a soldier. Everything about her—her face as well as her clothes—is colourless.

"She has a disconcerting way of staring into your eyes through her spectacles. The priest gobbles his food, dropping his knife and fork, crumbling his bread and kneading the crumbs into little balls that he pastes round the edge of his plate; his wife takes them off with her long fingers and keeps her eye on him like a mother watching a child,

now straightening the napkin tied round his neck, now pushing a piece of bread toward him, now turning back the sleeve of his cassock, and she does it all without a word.

"I told him what the old man had said about the soul. He flapped his arms as if about to fly away and said to his wife:

"'Ha! Hear that, Anna? Hm!'

"'That's due to ignorance,' she said emphatically.

"'Go on, go on, Matvei Savelyevich.'

"I said I could not give a proper account of the old man's sermon because I was not used to talking and had no education, I said my thoughts kept jumping about, but at this point he interrupted me again.

"'That's it—jumping about!' he said. 'An apt way of putting it: our thoughts keep jumping about. That applies to all of us, all of us Russians, that is. The thoughts of the common folk jump backward, to the East, and the thoughts of the educated folk jump forward, to the West, and therein lies our great and unacknowledged grief and the cause of our getting nowhere for so many centuries. History has buried us up to the neck between those two roads. That old man's thoughts jumped back one thousand seven hundred years: in the second century after the birth of Christ certain people maintained, as he does, that one must give full rein to the flesh and that this will do no harm to the spirit. They even affirmed that the more licence the flesh is given, the more pure the spirit will be. Such people called themselves Gnostics, and I will give you a book written about them, a most eloquent and absorbing work.'

"For some two hours he told me about various heresies, speaking with such skill and vehemence that I was held spellbound and could only sit and marvel. He threw off his cassock and hopped about the room in his worn black tunic like a thrush in a cage, waving his right arm as if flourishing a sword.

"His wife pushed her spectacles up on to her forehead.

"'Sasha!' she said quietly.

"But he did not hear her.

"'What is the soul?' he asked. 'The soul is a scroll recording all periods of human life, the very latest period not yet illumined by the light of the Holy Spirit. This scroll must be unrolled and the writing upon it, inscribed by the sharp finger of life, must be read with loving care.'

"Again his wife interrupted, this time more severely:

"'Sasha!'

"He heard, glanced at her, wilted, smiled and his cheek began to twitch.

"'Ah, yes,' he said. 'Very well, Anna.'

"He sat down in a corner and patted his hair. We spoke a little more about the goings-on in our town, but in a forced, listless sort of way, and soon I took my leave. The priest's wife saw me to the door and when we were in the hall she said with a self-conscious little laugh:

"'I hope you'll not tell anybody what he said.'

"'There's no one to tell it to,' I said.

"She pressed my hand warmly and asked me to come again. Her doing so laid a certain responsibility on me, but I could not see clearly what it was. The priest is a curious creature and very engaging, but there is something unsound about him. Of course I do not remember all he said, but I feel there is something unclerical in his ideas.

"They live in great poverty: scraps of furniture and dishes, and his wife's clothes and boots are patched; the only thing they have a lot of is books, I noticed two cases bursting with them in the next room, and all of them thick volumes. He lent me one, a fat book published by the secular press although it is about heresy.

"The more people I meet, the more convinced I am that while they all seem to be different outwardly, as soon as you get an inside glimpse you find they resemble one another in that they are all restless and unhappy."

"Maxim is too free with his hands. Yesterday he gave two of my young workmen a beating and they came to me bruised and bleeding to complain. I sent for him and gave him a talking-to, but he spoke up boldly, without so much as blinking an eye, and with the two workmen standing there listening:

"'And they'll get it from me even worse next time they make sow's ears at Shakir and laugh at his religion!'

"I, of course, gave him to understand that he was not the master here, but I liked what he said. The men at the rope works are a mischievous lot. And, in general, folk seem to be getting nastier, especially those from the artisans' settlement.

"From Vasya, son of the tavern-keeper Savelyev, Maxim got a torn book called *Bright and Dark Sides of Russian Life* which someone had left in the tavern. He read it to us five nights running. It is a sharp and hurtful book, painful to listen to, but there is no denying the truth of it. There are, it seems, seekers after the truth who know how we live here in Okurov; this makes everything they say particularly telling, as if they had come invisibly and delved into our lives and were reproaching us for them. Maxim and Shakir like the book, but Drozdov and I do not. It is nothing but criticism, everybody passes judgement on everybody else, all are dissatisfied, but nobody tries to do anything to improve matters. Drozdov has disgraced himself again. Shakir had a toothache and Drozdov, trying to cure it, rubbed his gums with a liquid that burnt them and made his teeth crumble. Drozdov was surprised, said that he had tried it on the governor of Ryazan without any ill effects."

"I drank for five weeks without stopping. At present I am more dead than alive, my head is like the inside of a pub, and my heart is giving me trouble."

Kozhemyakin gave a shudder of disgust as he recalled the nightmare of that drinking-bout. In spite of himself, a kaleidoscope of scenes and people rose in his mind.

Now he saw Drozdov sitting over his dinner, smacking his lips, pulling his whiskers out of his mouth and smoothing them back as he recited in an exalted singsong:

The soul requires nourishment,
The soul requires drink;
Nourish the soul no matter what
The fickle world may think.

"Shut up and eat," grumbled Natalya.

Maxim, too, cast a disapproving look at him and muttered:

"He buzzes like a mosquito."

Shakir, baring his discoloured teeth in fright, led Kozhemyakin into a corner of the kitchen and whispered:

"Old Khryapov says Drozdov was in jail, says he stole."

Kozhemyakin was reluctant to believe such a thing.

"He doesn't look like a thief," he objected.

"You see him much? People different, thieves different," Shakir insisted.

Tedium and hostility hung in the air; no one but Drozdov ever smiled, and he smiled cheerlessly and made up to everyone like a stray mongrel.

I'll go and visit the priest, Kozhemyakin said to himself one day when his boredom was unbearable.

That was how it had all started. On coming out of the gate he saw a man in a coat with his cap pulled down over his nose standing on the other side of the street. He was peering from under his cap, his head cocked like a bull's and his eyes starting out of his head. His cap and collar were sprinkled with hoarfrost.

"This Kozhemyakin's house?"

"Yes."

"Old man dead?"

"Long since."

"You his son?"

"Yes."

The man stepped on to the pavement and slowly walked away, lifting his feet in polished boots and leather galoshes heavily. Matvei, who had no choice but to follow him, made a point of not overtaking him and wondered anxiously who he could be.

"Don't recognize me, or don't want to admit it?" asked the man with even more marked contempt as he stopped and turned his red face to Matvei.

"I seem to know you," faltered Kozhemyakin, fearing to call forth a string of abuse.

But the man fell into step beside him, gave him a little poke with his elbow, and strode along with his belly thrust out.

"You know me all right," he said gruffly. "I used to work for your father. Remember Savka? Remember the thrashing they gave me, and how you were so frightened you brought me vodka and money? Not you, of course, but Pelageya. They say he killed her. That true?" He swept Matvei from head to foot with his eyes, then went on gloomily: "You'd never tell, of course. You were too young then, but they say you made love to your stepmother. I saw you at the Sychugovs—knew you straight off—the same eyes. Shall we drop into the tavern and recall old times?"

Kozhemyakin lacked the courage to refuse; the encounter was like a bad dream and his heart palpitated with memories of Pelageya and fear of Savka.

And so he found himself sitting in a shadowy corner of the big tap-room. Savka stretched his thick lips and jerked up his round head matted with woolly hair as he called:

"Hey, waiter!"

Kozhemyakin was ashamed. The only one who served at the tavern was Savelyev's son Vasya, a quiet, faded-looking

youth who was fond of books, played the accordion and was Maxim's friend.

"So you're the man who accompanies the preacher?" said Matvei.

"I am. He's about done for, the preacher is. Here's to Pelageya's soul."

They drank, then Savka asked sullenly:

"I hear you're not married. Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"Hm," drawled Savka, refilling the glasses. "They say you had a gentlewoman for a mistress."

"It's not true," cried Matvei with a stab of pain.

"Ashamed to admit it, seeing that she threw you over? She did throw you over, didn't she?"

Kozhemyakin glanced about the room in despair. The wallpaper was green with large red flowers in it and the tables were covered with red cloths; on the windows stood pots of neglected geraniums whose leaves had turned yellow. In a far corner sat the faded-looking Vasya fingering his accordion. The bass notes were hoarse, the treble arrogantly and irritatingly shrill.

"Not too happy, eh?" said Savka, smacking his lips.

Kozhemyakin longed to get away, but before he had a chance to, Savka, who had ordered more vodka and gulped down two glassfuls, was leaning over the table, his face purple, his eye glittering malevolently, telling him his story:

"Took me a long time to get back on my feet after that drubbing. My aunt took me to a monastery where there was a monk who doctored folk. I stayed on as stableman. Four years of it. An easy life—monks are good-hearted enough—but I was bored to death."

"Bored." Matvei repeated the familiar word, and the sound of it seemed to revive him.

"More than a man could bear. I took to drink, so the monks let me go."

"Everybody's bored," observed Kozhemyakin softly, his eyes on the stiff black bristles sprouting on the backs of Savka's red hands. He shuddered: the man gave off an odious smell that was a mixture of onions, wax and icon-lamp oil.

"Everybody's bored through and through," agreed Savka with a loud smack of satisfaction. "And the things they do to escape it! Horse-racing, pigeon-shooting, cards, cock-fights. Nothing helps. Women, too, and wine, and making money. None of it helps—it doesn't get through to their hearts."

He blew out his cheeks, made his eyes big and frightening, thrust his fingers into his matted hair and sat for a while in silence; then, with a smirk and a snort, he poured himself out another glass of vodka, gulped it down, and threw back his head.

"Drink! What are you waiting for?" he said. "I've seen a thing or two, brother! There are some that look as if they felt happy; they dig into a job like a leach into a dog's hide and suck it up, suck it up. They're like drunkards, they've got the habit, but the time comes when they take to drink too, or something else just as bad, and there you are, the stone's set rolling."

The more he drank, the more purple grew his face and the looser his tongue. He spoke faster and more smoothly, and the smirk hardly left his lips.

"Almost got sucked down into hard labour myself. One day I said to myself: It's a peasant you were born, it's a peasant you'll die, that's your fate. So I joined a village community and was given some land to work. I got married and settled down. Six years I bent over the plough, then I ran away. To hell with it! Left my wife and brats. Two little boys. Nearly had the daylight squeezed out of me in that village. Give to this one, give to that. A flock of relatives came buzzing round, all poor as church mice. One comes begging, another comes thieving, a third just takes me by

the throat and says, 'Hand over, that's what you're here for!'"

He chuckled and quenched his laughter by pouring a glass of vodka into his gaping mouth.

"I'm nobody's fool. Got up and left. Came to town. Wandered here, wandered there—no rest for the weary. Went back to the monastery, but the work was too hard for me. The land had taken all the strength out of me, the town had made me soft, the thrashing I got had ruined my heart. About that time a preacher turns up; not the one you know, a different one. A fake and a lecher. I took up with him. God, how that man could preach! His words would bring tears to your eyes. He called everybody's bluff, showed up everything, wasn't afraid of anybody. But when we were alone he'd laugh and say, 'It's easier to earn a living with your tongue than your hands.'"

"Did he believe what he preached?" asked Kozhemyakin faintly.

"Who knows? Seems to me he believed in God, but not in human beings. Wore me out, he did, what with shaking the tortures of hell in my face, sending himself and everybody else to perdition, and drinking and laughing and whoring and wailing, all mixed up together. One day he overeats himself and that's the end of him. I set out to seek another of his kind. Found an old man mumbling pious thoughts in a little village on the Vetluga. Listened to him for a bit and decided he was the man for me. 'Come, Grandad,' I said, 'that's a fine message you've got, but who can hear it in this hole? It's a sin to hide your talent.'"

Savka turned up his eyes in a frightening way, bared his teeth and wagged his big head.

"I had the preaching business pat by that time. 'I'm old,' said the preacher. 'It's time for me to give up the ghost and not go about teaching folk.' 'Nothing of the sort, Grandad,' said I. Well, I hooked on to him and been

dragging him round ever since, the old walrus! Nothing you can teach me in that line, brother!"

Suddenly one-eyed Tiunov put in an appearance.

"Mind if I join you?" he said, and flopped down on a chair.

"Vodka, Vasya!" he called. "So your preacher doesn't believe in anything?" he asked gently, his one eye boring into Kozhemyakin's face. "Doesn't believe in heaven, doesn't believe in hell, doesn't believe in cats or the witches' spell? I've come across many another like him."

The room went round, the walls billowed out like sails, and from behind Matvei came a familiar voice reading:

"Now, inhuman tyrant, fill the forests with thy shrieks. . . ."

"The wretch!" murmured Vasya.

"And when thou shalt cease to love me of thine own free will," went on the voice, "I shall force thee to it with a violation of thine honour. . . ."

Kozhemyakin turned round: at a table behind him Vasya and Maxim were sitting with their heads almost touching over a book which Maxim was reading aloud in the voice of a deacon reading the funeral service.

How is it that I seem to know the inner workings of all people, and to know beforehand what they will say? Kozhemyakin asked himself.

"He's known in his own village as a rake, a drunkard, and a savage," Savka was saying with a hoarse laugh.

"See?" yelled Tiunov. "They do what they like, squeeze the very gizzards out of people, and then when they get old they try to pull the wool over the Lord's eyes."

"True enough. What's your name?"

"Tiunov."

"Here's to telling the truth!"

Savka let out an obscene oath and Tiunov went on making his caustic observations:

"They try to make God think they took the wrong path for the sake of preserving the purity of their souls. . . ."

Savka's big head sank on his chest, his red fingers crawled over the table, overturning cups and glasses. He gave a hoarse laugh and smacked his lips.

"True, true," he murmured.

"You've seen a lot," said Tiunov in a high, thin voice. "How ought a man to live to be decent?"

"Who cares?" shouted Savka, striking the table and bursting into raucous laughter.

His laughter sobered Kozhemyakin.

"Well, I must be going," he said, getting up.

"But I'm serious . . ." insisted Tiunov.

"Who cares? Wait, Kozhemyakin. . . ."

"You think it's easier to get on in this world if you're a fool?"

"A lot easier."

"No, it's not. A fool's neither hot nor cold. A fool's like clay—in bad weather he clings to your feet, in fine weather he'll have nothing to do with you."

"I don't give a damn."

Lifting one hand, Savka began to bawl fiercely, rolling his eyes:

Ah, my mother brought me into the world,
Ah, to know a life of grief and care.
Ah, she pointed out no path to me,
Ah, where shall I go? Tell me, where?

Drunken tears rolled down his dirty grey cheeks, and Kozhemyakin suddenly felt sorry for him.

"What's the matter, brother?" he said, tears rolling down his own cheeks. "What's the matter?"

Leaning over the table, they embraced and kissed. Bits of broken crockery were ground under their heels and at last, linked in maudlin affection, they staggered out into the street.

When they were outside Maxim gave Savka a push.

"Be off with you, you pig!" he said, and took Matvei's arm. Resenting the interference, Matvei shook himself free,

"Be off with you yourself! Who do you take me for?" he shouted.

"Get along. You ought to be ashamed of yourself," said Maxim, pushing him ahead.

When they got home they woke up Drozdov and went into the kitchen, where they had tea and some more vodka. Shakir stamped his foot in rage.

"Why do you bring these pigs here?" he shouted at Maxim.

"Wait, you Tatar," said Tiunov, swaying on his feet. "There's a big matter to be settled."

Natalya stood beside the stove like a statue; she only moved when she blew her nose, and she did this so loudly that Kozhemyakin started each time. Green shadow-patterns crept over the walls of the kitchen and the faces of the people, as if mildew were spreading over everything. Savka's big head was like the head of a sheat-fish, Maxim's like a rusty spade. Tottering, Tiunov drew Shakir into a corner and put his hands on his shoulders.

"Don't we all worship the same tsar?" he said.

Drozdov, still half-asleep, turned up his nose and narrowed his eyes contemptuously as he said to Savka:

"You mean to say you were speaking of the soul, my good man?"

"Shut up, you draggle-tailed—"

But Drozdov was not to be shut up.

"So you're the one who takes the preacher about?" he said.

Savka sat staring fixedly in front of him, looking as funereal as a black cat in the dark.

"Aha!" shrieked Drozdov, "in other words you... in other words you—"

Savka picked up a cucumber from the table and stuffed it into Drozdov's mouth. Everyone burst into laughter, even Kozhemyakin, but he felt obliged to say:

"Come, friends, we mustn't offend each other."

"I can forgive anything," cried Drozdov. "Anything, once I respect. . . ."

"What about jail? You respect that?" came Shakir's quiet voice.

"Wha-at?" yelped Tiunov. "Wait, we've got to look into this. Here's something that must be cleared up."

Drozdov, whimpering indignantly, drove Shakir further into the corner as he tried to convince him of his gentle birth:

"For three months, I tell you, my mother lived with Count Rudolf. . . ."

Red-haired Maxim pulled him away and Savka kept saying:

"Bang him, whack him, grind up his rotten bones, pull off his tail!"

"Hands off! I'm a person of importance," shouted Drozdov. Presently Kozhemyakin felt Drozdov's moustache tickling his neck as he whispered into his ear: "Send for some girls, there's a good chap!" Then he beat himself on the chest with his fists and boasted to Tiunov: "Do I look like the common run? Have you ever seen anybody like me before?"

Tiunov blinked his one eye approvingly:

"As if anybody could come up to you! You're the only onion among all these potatoes!"

"A drink, friends!" cried Savka, lifting his head. "Hey, bobtail! Drink!" He began pounding the table with his fists and shouting at the top of his lungs: "Hallelujah! Hallelujah!"

"The fat-head!" said Tiunov with a wave of his hand. After that everyone seemed to vanish in a void, out of which they emerged gradually, waving their arms, shouting and muttering. No one had any idea of the time, not even whether it was day or night; everything was hazy, all impressions were blurred. At last they went out to the bath-house,

where they steamed themselves and drank beer; then, naked, they straggled back to the house through the orchard, pushing one another into the snow.

Three girls arrived. One was thin and cross-eyed with twisted neck. The other two were fat and they looked and dressed exactly alike. Savka and Drozdov kept mixing them up and fighting over them until Drozdov advised Savka to smear his girl's face with soot. He did so, which made her protest in a bass voice.

The cross-eyed girl sat on Kozhemyakin's knees, pulled his beard and kept asking:

"Do you love me, you big bad wolf?"

"Ye-es," he would reply meekly.

Savka sat on the floor and shouted, "Hallelujah!" and tried to shut his eyes by poking his fingers into them, but they sprang open in spite of him. Drozdov put his arms round Tiunov and kissed him.

"You, Yakov, are a one-sided fellow," he said. "You only see one side of things; just one side, but two-eyed folk see two sides. That's why I always say a person should look at things with his eyes half-closed. I'm a freak myself, but don't you worry, I can always see what's what. Who started this life of ours, eh? Come on, who started it? The women! Right?"

"And you're a bobtail!" asserted Savka obstinately as he went on poking his fingers into his eyes.

The cross-eyed girl stroked Kozhemyakin's hair and said softly:

"I've got a cat that loves me to death, dear me, how that cat does love me! It follows me about like my shadow, wherever I go. And at night it lies on my chest and purrs and I listen to it and understand what it's trying to say, really I do. And it's so warm and cozy with the cat on my chest."

Kozhemyakin was afraid of her. He thought she was mad but he had no means of getting away from her, so he just

kept pushing back against something that creaked and gave under his weight. Suddenly the cross-eyed girl bit his shoulder, fell on the floor and began flinging herself about like a fish on dry land. Savka seized her by the feet and dragged her to the door.

"She's having a fit!" he cried.

They all leaped up, shouted, rushed about, and then disappeared with a hideous clamour as if the earth had swallowed them up.

Kozhemyakin found himself sitting up in bed swathed in wet towels and propped up with pillows, holding his head in his hands as still as possible, for the least movement brought a wave of nausea that blinded him and made his heart stand still.

Maxim was sitting at the table reading aloud, and certain odd phrases stuck in Kozhemyakin's memory:

"Be merciful, my lady; how long shalt thou preserve so haughty a mien?"

He had a vision of Tiunov's head, long and one-eyed, nodding on his scraggy neck like a dry poppy-pod.

"Let's talk straight . . ." he seemed to be saying.

"Has Tiunov gone?" Matvei asked softly.

Without raising his eyes from the book, Maxim said pensively:

"He went of his own accord, but Savka was thrown out. We've got to put Drozdov out too. Tiunov's not so bad." He paused, then added, "He looks like an anchor."

Outside, snow was falling heavily. Kozhemyakin watched it come down, sweeping against the window-pane like swathes of cloth.

God, how I hate myself! he thought.

Once more the words of the book penetrated his consciousness:

"And as the rosy dawn opened its portals to the sun, whose bright rays drove away the shades of night—"

It was night. For some reason the lamp standing on the

floor, and its green glow, which resembled Tiunov's sharp eye, was the focal point on which, with baleful vigilance, the encompassing shadows were concentrated. The room reeked of ammonia and sauerkraut. On a chair at the foot of the bed Maxim was sitting barefooted, beltless, with the collar of his blouse unfastened, his head now drooping forward on his chest, now jerking back.

"I'm so sick," moaned Kozhemyakin.

"Would you like some sauerkraut juice?" asked Maxim, covering a yawn with his hand.

"I'd rather you told me something."

"A story?"

"No, something about yourself."

Maxim scratched his ear as he considered:

"I don't know anything about myself," he said uncertainly; then, suddenly pulling his chair forward and speaking with animation:

"I'll tell you about how a crow fell in love with me, a very funny story. It happened when I was only sixteen. In some bushes out in the garden I found a crow with a broken leg and wing covered with blood. I washed the poor thing and tied its broken bones to tiny wooden splints. How that bird pecked me as I did it! My whole hand swelled up. I hurt the crow, of course. It cawed and fluttered and almost pecked my eye out every time I put a new bandage on it. Almost pecked me to death."

He laughed and shook his head at the memory and his whole face changed, as if a mask had dropped off.

"And then it grew used to me and was just like a dog. It went hopping sideways after me wherever I went, dragging its wing along the ground, cawing and twisting its head as if trying to look into my eyes."

He turned a grave, reproachful look on Kozhemyakin to say impressively:

"It's all wrong to say a crow's eyes are a blank. A crow's a very clever bird."

He gave his soft, self-conscious smile and proceeded dreamily:

"As soon as it saw me it would go hopping about my feet —I was frightened to move for fear of stepping on it, that was its way of asking me to put it on my shoulder. I'd pick it up and put it there and it would peck at my ear and make a sort of snoring sound, very funny to hear. Everybody laughed at it."

He stopped and hung his head. Kozhemyakin thought to himself: Why is it that people always tell about the cats and birds and dogs and horses they have loved, but never about the people? Are they ashamed?

Again Maxim began to speak, this time in a flat, dispirited voice:

"Later somebody must have hit it, or perhaps a cat mauled it. I could see it was dying. I picked it up and it pushed its head under my arm and nestled against my chest as close as it could and gave a little flutter and died."

He is young and good-looking, thought Matvei, closing his eyes and pretending to sleep. He ought to be courting girls and playing the accordion, but he lives like a monk, never spends a kopek, his boots need mending and he hasn't even a Sunday suit. A dull sort of fellow, always criticizing people. Lives in a hole. Bad people are always out in the street raising a shindy, and the better ones slink off into holes.

He had a desire to set down all his thoughts accurately and preserve them intact, with all the underlying fears and apprehensions that kept multiplying within him. He longed for a life of peace and quiet, but something prevented him from achieving it. As he gazed at the sturdy form of Maxim through the lashes of his half-closed eyes, the idea came to him that it was this youth who caused the disturbance, that it was he who stirred up in his soul something new and as yet uncomprehended, but something he resented.

Just wait, I'll take myself in hand, was the thought that went through his mind as he fell asleep.

Then there occurred something shocking, bizarre and comic. Kozhemyakin was awakened by the creaking of the door and the floorboards. As he peered into the darkness, he grew weak and broke into a cold sweat. He was too frightened to let out a cry. A long grey figure with one thin arm outstretched was wriggling slowly and noiselessly over the floor towards the bed with the movements of a squashed frog.

A thief. Maxim, Kozhemyakin concluded when he had taken himself in hand, and as soon as the thief's head was under the bed he straddled his back, seized him by the hair, and began to pound his head against the floor.

"Help!" he shouted.

The thief threw up his legs and began kicking him, clutching at the floor with his nails and hissing like warm beer.

"Caught!" whispered Kozhemyakin, but so great was his agitation that his heart stopped beating and the strength went out of his arms. The thief twisted out of his grasp and said in the voice of Drozdov:

"Wait, don't shout, for the love of Christ! Wait... listen...."

"You-u!" gasped Kozhemyakin in astonishment. He immediately felt relieved, but a second later was vexed that the thief was not Maxim.

Drozdov sat on the floor wiping his face with his hands as a cat washes its whiskers.

"Give me a beating yourself, I won't ask for mercy. Here, beat me, but don't call anybody," he whispered hurriedly.

He pushed his head against Matvei's chest and warm tears dripped on to Matvei's bare feet.

"Quiet!" said Kozhemyakin, striking him on the head and listening. Silence. Nobody was coming. Drozdov blew his nose noisily on the hem of his shirt, then threw his arms round Kozhemyakin's legs and pressed his wet face against his knees.

"Who put you up to it, eh?"

Kozhemyakin hoped he would say, "Maxim," but Drozdov muttered:

"The devil. Who else?"

"You're a fool if ever there was one," said Kozhemyakin angrily and without fear as he got up. He lit the lamp and gave a little start: at his feet lay a broken knife.

"You wanted to . . . to . . ." he stammered, going cold.

Drozdov pulled himself to his knees, waving his arms and whimpering hurriedly:

"No, no! God's my witness! I just meant to open the chest. Not to touch you. I swear it."

"You *are* a fool," repeated Kozhemyakin with a feeling akin to pity. "As if you could do it with this! It's got metal strips on it and a double lock, you dunce!"

Aware that what he was saying was beside the point, Kozhemyakin moved towards the door and Drozdov crawled after him like a spider, clutching at his legs and pleading:

"Don't go away. Give me a beating straight away—only not too hard. And don't call anybody."

His face had broken out in blotches and his nose was bleeding. He wiped it on the sleeves and hem of his blouse, leaving dark patterns on the grey linen.

I gave it to him all right! thought Kozhemyakin with satisfaction, sitting down on a chair.

"I took you in, you cur! I fed you, looked after you, spent money on you . . ." he said slowly, his mind on something else.

"Turn me out!" said Drozdov after a moment's consideration.

"Aren't you ashamed?" murmured Kozhemyakin, not knowing what else to say and avoiding the thief's eyes. Drozdov snatched his hand and smacked it with wet lips.

"I'm weak, I can't do hard work, I was made for easy work. I'd only have taken ten rubles, I swear I would—fifteen at most. Do you call that stealing? I can't live here for ever, it's time I was moving on."

"I ought to call the police," said Kozhemyakin listlessly.

"Go on, then!" said Drozdov loudly, blowing his nose even louder. "That'll cost you a pretty sum. The police aren't like me. They know how to fish in a man's money-box!"

Suddenly he began to speak freely, fearlessly, accusingly.

"A fine one, you are! Turn a man over to the police, throw him in jail and all the rest, for a mere ten rubles! Who are you to judge me? Well, hand me over if you want to; you'll only stir up trouble for yourself!"

Kozhemyakin felt ashamed and embarrassed.

"Shut your mouth, you swine!"

He did not know what he ought to do and could not decide on anything definite. He had no intention of calling the police; it would be unpleasant and a bother. And he shrank from laying hands on Drozdov again; once was enough.

He was startled by a noise in the hall. Jumping up, he said to Drozdov excitedly:

"Someone's coming! Make up some story, damn you! I don't want this to get about."

"Of course," whispered Drozdov, nodding his head and getting up off his knees.

Shakir appeared in the doorway with a cudgel in his hand. The cudgel was trembling, his head was thrust forward, his eyes were narrowed and his teeth bared; over his shoulder could be seen Maxim's dishevelled head and white, frowning face.

"Go back to bed," said Kozhemyakin with a disparaging wave of his hand. "It was only him."

"I'm a lunatic," said Drozdov, crossing himself and nodding his head. "Really. I got up in my sleep to walk in the moonlight and banged into a door."

"Go back to bed," said Matvei wearily.

They left reluctantly. Drozdov bent down to listen at the keyhole and whispered with a sly smile:

"They're waiting out in the hall."

He talks to me as if I was his best friend, thought Matvei.

"All I have to do is call them back and they'll give it to you!" he exploded angrily.

"Oh, yes; that's all you have to do," muttered Drozdov, blinking foolishly. "There's nothing that gives a man so much pleasure as throwing another out."

Kozhemyakin felt that Drozdov was breaking down his defences.

"Be off with you, you brute," he said.

But Drozdov shrugged his shoulders and said in bewilderment:

"Where am I to go? Do you think they believed what I said? Not much. They're waiting for me out there. Oh, no, I won't leave this room. I'll curl up here on the sofa."

And he went over to the sofa and lay down.

"My word, it's nice and warm in here," he said with a prolonged yawn.

Kozhemyakin laughed and put out the candle, then he sat down on the edge of the bed. The black window-panes glistened as if someone had just polished them; a tangle of shadows crept over the floor to the door and climbed up it. The wind rustled as it passed over the walls of the house.

"You behave like a half-wit," Matvei said reproachfully. "You must have a guardian angel watching over you."

"Yes," agreed Drozdov after a pause, "things turned out better than they might have. Better than if the police had come: all that fuss and expense. As it is, perhaps you'll give me a little something tomorrow and I'll go away for good."

"Aren't you ashamed to have done this to me?"

"I'm more ashamed to ask for money."

"And not ashamed to steal it?"

Drozdov sighed.

"Stealing, of course, is harder, but after all, it's you who does it, nobody sees you, nobody knows. . . ."

The rascal! Matvei said to himself.

"But aren't you afraid?"

"A bit. And yet a fellow feels freer. Just takes it and goes off without being under obligation to anybody."

"You've got no standards, man. You don't understand what's good and what's bad."

"Yes, I do. You're good, for instance."

"I'm good? And yet you wanted to steal from me."

"If you were bad you'd do the stealing yourself."

"One can't argue with you," laughed Kozhemyakin. "And there's no telling whether you're childish or just stupid. There's no sense in that head of yours."

They went on talking till almost dawn.

"It's a poor life you live," said Drozdov emphatically. "No pleasure, no change. . . ."

"And how do you think I ought to live?" asked Kozhemyakin sardonically.

"So that it's one thing today, another tomorrow, and next month something different again."

"A sure way to find yourself in jail!"

"People are the same wherever you are."

"Have you tried it?"

"What? Jail? For eleven months."

"Capital! And what put you there?"

"Money. The root of all evil," replied Drozdov sleepily.

"Stealing?"

"That's what it's called."

"Much?"

"Three hundred and forty-seven rubles twenty kopeks."

He sat up, dropped his legs over the edge of the sofa, put his elbows on his knees, leaned forward and said with animation:

"A Jew let me down, damn him! It was during a pogrom in Zverevo where I lived; they were beating the Jews—carriers, carters, butchers, everybody! God, how they beat them! Beat them to death. They grabbed the women and

girls by the hair and skirts and pulled the clothes off them and dragged them naked through the streets, kicking them in the belly, in the belly, mind—women and girls, with bodies like marble. It was a sight to drive a man out of his mind. After all, everybody—Jesus Christ, and the tsar, and the saints—everybody's born of the belly and breasts of a woman, and here were men kicking them with their big boots. . . ."

"I don't believe you," cried Kozhemyakin with a shudder of horror. He, too, sat up in bed, but Drozdov, ignoring him, went spluttering on in great agitation:

"I can't bear to see a woman being beaten. I climbed up on a roof and hid behind a chimney, shivering as if I'd caught a chill. I could hardly hold on, my hands were shaking so, and down below—God! what they were doing! 'Be-e-eat the bastards!' Shrieks. Feathers flying. Lord Almighty! And there I sat, watching it all against my will, I simply couldn't shut my eyes. Smashing those naked women!"

"But why?" asked Kozhemyakin with morbid curiosity.

"Because they were Jews."

"I don't believe it."

"It's God's truth. Simply because they were Jews."

Drozdov was leaning so far forward it seemed he must topple over on to Matvei's bed.

"And that was when you stole the money?"

"Oh, no. It must have been a week later."

"From the Jews?"

"Certainly not. From the coroner. I must have gone soft in the head with the fright. Killing off women like that! Why, if you kill off women, you kill off everybody. It's the end. And the way they tore them to pieces, without the least heart!"

"Stop talking about it!" said Matvei peremptorily, unable to believe it, yet seeing in his mind's eye how Pelageya had gone down the path through the orchard winding

her torn-out hair round her finger. "Tell me about yourself."

"That's what I am doing. Well, after that I wandered about in a sort of daze, and one day I met a friend of mine who said to me, 'Did you see the pogrom? Go and tell the coroner what the sons of bitches did!' So I went. I found him sitting there, a young chap with a little black moustache and gold spectacles, picking his teeth with a toothpick. He asked me what I'd seen. I told him, but I couldn't stand the fellow—to talk about murdering people and tearing woman to pieces and him picking his teeth as if that was the only thing that mattered. Then he went to a cabinet in the corner and bent down to get something, and on the table beside me were all sorts of things, among them a wallet. Here's my chance! thinks I, and slipped the wallet into my coat. As soon as he let me go I went to a Jew I knew, a cap-maker, a fine old man, very clever, everybody knew him, an ex-soldier he was, and he began telling me what had happened. It fairly made my hair stand on end! The room was crammed full of children—his grand-children and nieces and nephews—it was all I could do to keep from stepping on them. He'd had his share, too—the windows of his house were smashed and the furniture broken, but at least all his family had managed to stay alive by hiding. I gave him the three hundred and forty-seven rubles and twenty kopeks and told him to divide it up among the victims. But he didn't understand and went and reported me to the police. So an officer came for me. 'Are you the one who gave the old Jew money?' he asked. 'I am,' I replied. 'Where did you get it?' 'I found it.' He didn't believe me, and by that time the toothpicker had reported the loss of his wallet. So they sent me to jail."

"You really are soft in the head," murmured Kozhemyakin.

"I know," nodded Drozdov. "At that time I was quite daft, the lawyer said so, and so did the judge."

"You had a trial?"

"Yes, indeed," replied Drozdov boastfully. "A fine trial, with all the trimmings. The Jew was at the trial, and he saw what a mistake he'd made, he even burst out crying and begged them not to send me to jail; they tried to shut him up, but he kept begging and begging, and at last they led him away. I really felt sorry for him. He was quite crushed, the old fool; you see, he thought I had stolen the money from the Jews during the pogrom."

Kozhemyakin jumped up, lighted the candle and held it in front of Drozdov's face:

"Are you sure you haven't made this story up?" he asked.

"Of course not, why should I?" asked Drozdov, blinking and smiling dreamily. "It's all true."

Matvei put the candle on a chair and walked the length of the room once or twice.

He's not lying, he's just a fool, he said to himself.

Drozdov yawned and curled up on the sofa again.

"My word, I'm sleepy," he said.

"At least put a pillow under your head," said Kozhemyakin, retreating to a corner of the room.

Drozdov made no answer, and when Kozhemyakin came back he was snoring loudly. With a baffled feeling, Matvei stood looking down at his childlike face.

Drozdov "happened" to feel sorry for the Jew and "happened" to steal the money: what does that mean? he thought.

Dawn came. The light of the candle paled and threw flickering shadows over the dark stains on the floor near the bed. The yellow tongue of flame darted here and there as if trying to escape from the candle, and the stains gave the impression of moving, of seeking a hiding-place.

Kozhemyakin heaved a deep sigh and began dressing in a leisurely way, casting a sidelong glance at the figure on the sofa from time to time, without arriving at any definite opinion of him or experiencing any clear emotion.

He'd better go away, he thought; he may be a saint for all I know, but still, one fine day he may "happen" to put arsenic in somebody's soup.

When he was dressed he took out three worn five-ruble notes, woke Drozdov up, gave them to him, and said:

"Here, friend, take these and be off with you."

Drozdov seized his hand, wrung it, and said happily:

"Thank you! Thank you! I was desperate; didn't know how to get away; felt trapped. But now I'll go on wings!"

Kozhemyakin turned away to avoid seeing the expression of his face.

An hour later, without so much as having breakfasted, Semyon Drozdov flicked his moustache and held out a thin hand to everybody as he said with a beaming smile:

"Good-bye, friends; I wish you health, wealth and happiness!"

They forced themselves to smile and wish him luck in return. Kozhemyakin saw their reluctance and resented it. He kissed Drozdov and went into his own room.

"I'll never forget all you've done for me to my dying day, Matvei Savelyevich!" Drozdov called out to him.

He really is a fool, thought Kozhemyakin with a sigh, feeling deep down within him that he regretted his going.

Another one gone, nobody knows where! was the melancholy thought that took slow form in his mind. He's gone, and I remain, and again it's as if I'd only seen him in a dream. It's all past human understanding.

On the same day Natalya died suddenly after dinner. Matvei made the following entry in his notebook:

"After dinner Natalya was suddenly taken very ill, she threw back her head, went blue in the face, and gasped:

" 'Holy Mother! I've eaten something!'

"Maxim said:

" 'I should think you had! You eat as if you got paid by the pailful!'

"It is true that for some time she had been eating like a horse. She would eat till her eyes popped out, her arms went limp, and she could scarcely breathe and had to stop until the spell passed; she was a very disagreeable sight at such moments, Maxim tried to talk her out of it and Shakir was ashamed of her, he would blush till his ears seemed to have caught fire.

"We were so used to it that we paid no attention to her this time; she got up, went to the door, and suddenly raised her hands to her throat and fell down in the doorway. They picked her up and laid her on a bench, her nose was bleeding, she was breathing hard, and she gasped:

" 'I'm ... dying ...'

"They sent for the priest, she began to hiccough and died without our even knowing it. When the priest arrived he told us she was dead. Shakir screwed up his face and crept sideways out into the hall and went up the stairs into the attic, holding on to the walls and banister as if he was drunk. I went after him. 'Where are you going?' I said, but he seemed not to hear me, he sat down on one of the steps and kept murmuring to himself, 'Allah! Allah!' I tried to find something comforting to say, but what can you say to make death easier? I just put my arms round him and said nothing. We must have sat there for about an hour.

"There was nothing I could say about her; I had never liked her and hardly even noticed her; she did nothing but work and eat, what could a person find to say about her? Of course I felt sorry, with a sort of dumb sorrow.

"We buried her this morning. It was pitiful to see Shakir, he walked behind the coffin to one side, rubbing up against fences like a dog whose master has struck it and sent it away and it does not know whether it dare come back and ask forgiveness or not. The beggars cast sidelong glances at him and made filthy and spiteful remarks. How I hate beggars!

"Shakir did not go into the cemetery, they buried her without him and I was frightened when I saw he was not there and ran to look for him without even throwing my handful of earth into the open grave. He was kneeling and praying in a field on the other side of the fence, I brought him home and we talked for the rest of the day. He is a very good man with a pure soul. He cried and said to me:

" 'She was a good Russian woman, very shrewd, saw everything and had a very kind heart, rather tell a lie than hurt a person she didn't want to hurt. She knew what to do when a man felt bad, she put her arms round him and said: everything will be all right, don't worry, be patient. She was very like the Virgin Mary and she always talked about the Virgin Mary. She talked as if she knew nothing, but she knew everything. At night she would say: we're no better than others, we must not remember when others do us wrong; we don't remember when we do others wrong.'

"Later he said to me:

" 'You're not my master, you're my brother,' and I repeated it after him with all my heart, for I love him dearly.

"He came to sleep in my room; I told him I was afraid to sleep alone after a funeral, but really I was afraid for him, there is a lot of rope in our house and grief is the devil's handmaid. At night he would lift his head and listen to find out whether I was sleeping or not, then he would kneel and begin to pray; that went on all night, and in the morning he looked at me, gave a hopeless little shrug and went out; I did not follow him for I could see by his face that he had fought off his grief. What a pity I could not think of anything nice to say about Natalya! I should like to write fine, solemn, inspiring words about somebody!

"Father Alexander read the funeral service, he did it very well, very impressively, with deep feeling, in a trembling voice. As we were coming home from the cemetery he said to me in a friendly way:

"'Why don't you ever come to see me any more? My wife's uncle is here and we've got an organ. My wife will play for you.'

"I think I shall go."

He did, and there he met a man so different from anyone he had ever known before that it was as if he had been transported to another world.

The man's appearance was extraordinary and there was a restlessness in his movements not usually to be found in one his age. Matvei was instantly struck and even disconcerted by this quality. There was something unusual and intriguing even about the way he greeted Kozhemyakin:

"How do you do," he said in a deep bass voice, giving Matvei's hand a tug downwards. "Very glad to meet you, very glad indeed; sit down. Your name's Matvei Savelyevich, isn't it? Mine is Mark Vasilyevich."

The next instant, as if he had completely forgotten Matvei's existence, he was pacing the floor of the dingy little room, waving his arms and saying:

"The woods there are marvellously beautiful, the rivers are wide and swift, the cattle are big and sleek and the people—well, the people are more reserved than here, and on one hand that's bad, and on the other it's good, it means they know their own worth."

He was wearing a belted tunic of grey stuff with a patch pocket on the breast. The legs of his shabby trousers were pushed into the tops of his unpolished boots, and the whole outfit went badly with his broad snub-nosed face covered by a beard which, in Russian fashion, reached from his eyes to his shoulders. His whole neck was a mass of beard, it even grew out of his ears, but his head was bald except for a few wispy grey strands on his temples and hanging down behind. His legs were bowed, his belly protruded, his arms were short and constantly in motion as his

fingers felt the texture of objects, plucked at his trousers, or drew patterns in the air.

He's ugly, and yet there's something attractive, even apostolic, about his face, thought Kozhemyakin as he studied him closely.

His brow was furrowed by deep red lines that looked like scratches. His big skull, smooth on top, shaggy behind and on the sides, gave one the impression that here was a man of dogged resolution, but the soft and lively glow of his little eyes was incompatible with doggedness.

Mark Vasilyevich's face was as variable as an autumn day: now old and solemn, now young and gay. The twinkle in his eyes kept changing the aspects of his personality.

He paced the floor, constantly running his short fingers through his beard and moustache, stepping out on his bandy legs with the gravity of a turkey-cock, and his staid walk was inconsonant with the perpetual movement of his arms and head and the lively play of his facial expression. There was something comical about him; the sight of him drew a smile, but his terse, clear speech commanded attention and made a deep impression.

The priest's drab little wife pushed her spectacles up on her forehead, let her hands and sewing drop in her lap, and sat listening beside the window, putting in a quiet word or two from time to time. The dishevelled priest, on the other hand, kept jumping up and rushing about the room, knocking into chairs, dropping down on the sofa as if in despair, holding his head in his hands and crying:

"But look, Uncle Mark—"

And Uncle Mark would say to him in his impassive bass voice:

"Stop hopping about; it doesn't become one of your station. What I say is, you must take the chains off people—all of them, once and for ever. But what you want is to exchange one set of chains for another."

"But that freedom of yours is impossible, it just can't be achieved!"

"What have you and your ilk to say to a man? Nothing but: 'You're bad, bad through and through, you've sunk in the mire of sin and become like a beast.' And the man believes you, for in deeds as well as in words you deny the original goodness in him. You do everything to rob him of all hope and convince him of the irresistible force of evil. You uproot his faith in himself and in the creative power of his own will, and by clipping his wings you make him sink lower and lower in the mire."

"What are you saying?" cried the priest, jumping up and stamping his foot like an angry child.

From the corner came a sobering voice:

"Sasha!"

The priest, jerking up his head, dropped down on the sofa, and again the man spoke in a deep, steady voice:

"Don't keep telling a man that he and all he does are bad, and that life itself is bad and can never be improved. On the contrary, tell him he can become better because he is the source of all things, the root from which all action springs."

"Do you find this interesting?" Matvei heard someone whisper in his ear. Starting, he raised his head and met the narrowed grey eyes of the priest's wife, who was bending over him.

He drew his hand across his forehead uneasily and said, taking a deep breath:

"Yes, indeed! It's just what I need. But I have difficulty in following him."

"Who, in your opinion, is right?" she asked, smiling and putting on her spectacles again.

"Your uncle," he said with a finality that was a surprise even to himself.

The priest's wife straightened up.

"D'you hear that, Sasha?" she said.

Her uncle, smoking and snorting, stood in the middle of the room looking at Kozhemyakin.

"Of course I'm right!" he said with a wink. "Anyone who's lived long enough to have a little silver on his temples will agree with me because he's seen something of life. As for your preachers, they don't know the facts of life or take them into account."

"But you're a preacher yourself, and a fanatical one at that!" exclaimed the priest.

Uncle Mark gave a deprecating wave of his hand and sat down next to Kozhemyakin.

"Matvei Savelyevich," he said, "I'm in need of a room of some sort. "I've been looking for one for over a week, but in vain."

"I don't think you ought . . ." stammered the priest.

Kozhemyakin got up, bowed, and said with some trepidation:

"Allow me to offer you one. I have lots of rooms, a whole houseful, and I live all by myself."

He wanted this man to live beside him, he wanted to see him and listen to him every day. He realized that the tone of his voice gave him away, that he was pleading for this favour like a beggar and that it was foolish and unworthy of him, and yet he was so afraid of being refused that he hung his head and began to mutter under his breath.

The priest's wife said in an unaccountably stern and dry tone:

"It is necessary that you should know, Matvei Savelyevich, that my uncle has just returned from Siberia where he was exiled for political reasons."

Kozhemyakin sat down and smiled happily.

"I know," he said.

"Already?"

"That is, I guessed. I could tell by what he said."

"Oh, that's how," said the priest's wife gently, and the priest and Uncle Mark smiled and exchanged glances.

"Well, priest?" said the uncle with a meaning look.

The priest took his arm, rubbed against him, and said:

"It's only natural. I'm exceedingly fond of you, uncle, and growing fonder every day."

Kozhemyakin suddenly felt completely at ease.

"Last year a certain lady lived with me. Yevgenia Petrovna Mansurova by name . . . ."

"Mansurova? You don't say!" cried Uncle Mark. "Why, I know her. Remember, Anna? Sysoyeva? She's the one! Well, well! I saw her only two months ago!"

He gazed intently at Kozhemyakin, clutched his beard and let out a cloud of tobacco smoke.

"Your town was a blow to her."

"A blow? What do you mean?" asked Matvei softly.

"A blow over the head. She used to dream of a heroic life, of performing great deeds, but now she insists, as do many others—in fact she even cries it from the housetops—that this is no time for heroic deeds, that people must take to the simple life, must go and live in small towns like this."

"Does she want to come back?" asked Matvei with a faint spark of hope.

"Here? No, she'll never come back here."

Uncle Mark turned his glowing eyes on Kozhemyakin and shook his bald head.

"No, she'll never come back here," he repeated. "As for sowing seeds on barren soil, those are feeble words. Everybody in Russia, my dear man, wants to get the greatest amount of enjoyment with the least amount of labour. That's a quality we've inherited from the East. The desire for enjoyment without the expense of effort is a ruinous desire. Yet our priest, here, champions it—"

"Uncle!" implored the woman softly.

Uncle Mark began pacing the floor again.

"Nothing good will ever come of us until we learn to find enjoyment in labour," he said weightily. "No life can

be based merely on enjoyment, for life is, in its essence, activity, and yet we question the worth of activity. That is stupid, or rather, swinish. For, having inherited the fruits of the labour of our long-suffering forefathers, we live on their blood and bones, enjoying all the good they created without doing anything to multiply this good either for ourselves or our offspring, and this I contend and will go on contending can be likened only to the conduct of pigs gobbling up the acorns lying on the ground under an oak-tree."

He hitched up his trousers so violently that he pulled one leg out of his boot-top, and as he bent down to push it back he looked for all the world like a butting goat.

"An idle man is the greatest liar and hypocrite on earth, for nothing is so hard to justify as laziness. Life was made for us, but it is up to us to perfect it, and those who do not wish to work are obliged to resort to the argument that all life and effort are pointless."

He straightened up, puffing and red-faced.

"Make use of it, and then scoff at it? How cheap!"

So he knew Yevgenia! thought Kozhemyakin happily. It was strange to hear him say such sharp things in a calm, deep voice, without shouting excitedly, but thoughts of Yevgenia kept Matvei from following him.

She will never come back, he repeated to himself.

Until that moment the hope of seeing her again had remained alive in him, but now it was dead, and he suffered.

The priest's wife lit the lamp. Matvei Savelyevich jumped up, glanced about the smoke-filled room, bowed to the old man, who seemed to be floating in the grey haze, and took his leave in hasty embarrassment.

"Forgive me for staying so long, I didn't notice the time."

All three of them saw him to the door and said the usual things with such hearty simplicity that they took on real significance. He emerged into the empty street as if from a bath, so clean and refreshed did he feel, and he walked

home slowly, afraid of spilling any of the benevolence that had filled his heart in that modest home. But at the bottom lay a heavy, bitter sediment:

She will never come back.

Two days later Uncle Mark moved into Kozhemyakin's house. He came in the morning, and instantly it was as if all the windows in the house had been flung open, flooding the rooms with the heady air of spring. When Uncle Mark was introduced to Shakir, he stood for a moment taking in the Tatar's grey face with its close-clipped grey moustache and beard, then suddenly addressed him in the Tatar tongue. Shakir was almost frightened; he raised his eyebrows and opened his mouth as if gasping for air, revealing the black stumps of his crumbling teeth, and broke into shrill, joyful laughter.

"The Tatars are a fine people," said Uncle Mark to Kozhemyakin. "Their minds don't work quickly, but they're honest. They'll show us what they can do yet, just you wait."

Then he began telling Shakir in Russian that prophets of a new faith had appeared in Persia. Their names were Bab, Yakhiya and Bekha-Ulla, and a Holy Book called *Kitabe-Akdes* had been written.

"And there it is said: 'Let a man take pride in his love of the human race.'"

Shakir questioned him eagerly in a mixture of Russian and Tatar, and Maxim, who was in the corner untying the rope round the new lodger's big leather trunk, tossed his head and said:

"It's only natural the Tatars and Jews should love everybody, they live among strangers."

"Don't be in such a hurry to have your say," Kozhemyakin reproved him.

"And what about us Russians?" said Uncle Mark, flicking his beard.

"Us? We live at home," said Maxim, tugging at a rope.

"He's cheeky," laughed Shakir. "He's still young."

At this Maxim squared his shoulders, looked at each in turn, and marched out of the room with the rope in his hands, saying as he went:

"It's no sin to be young, and no foolishness either."

"A touchy fellow," laughed Uncle Mark.

"He really is young and foolish," said Matvei apologetically. "Don't pay any attention to him."

Uncle Mark put his hand on Matvei's shoulder.

"The Arabs have a saying that goes: 'The foolishness of unspoiled youth is more edifying than the wisdom of crabbed age.' "

And he made extensive inquiries about Maxim as he removed clothes, books and bundles of papers from the trunk.

He treats me as if I were a child, thought Kozhemyakin good-naturedly.

Uncle Mark was the same with everyone. He seemed to say everything that was on his mind, and everything he said sounded convincing and revealed an attitude towards people that was exacting and domineering, yet friendly and well-wishing.

The first day he was there he made several jokes at Maxim's expense, and that evening in the kitchen he knelt in front of the young man's open trunk, going through his books, tossing them carelessly on the floor and saying:

"This is trash—so is this—and this—"

Maxim stood behind him with his hands behind his back and a wry smile on his face. When he could stand it no longer he said sarcastically:

"I suppose you've read them all?"

Uncle Mark held out a handful of the discarded books to him and said:

"Choose any one of them and I'll tell you everything that's in it."

Maxim gave a sigh.

"I can't be bothered," he said.

"Why not? Afraid I'll show you up?"

"Nothing of the sort."

"As if I didn't know! But I can give you better books than these."

Maxim knelt down beside him.

"Will you really?" he asked sceptically.

"I will."

"What are yours about?"

"Everything: life, people . . . ."

"I know enough about people without books," said the boy with another sigh.

Uncle Mark snorted, sat down on the floor, and clasped his hands round his knees.

"Do you, now?" he said.

"Certainly. It's not hard."

"Well then, my boy, be so kind as to tell me what you know about people." The old man's tone was grave, but Shakir burst out laughing and Kozhemyakin, too, was amused.

"It's easy to laugh," said Maxim, getting up and frowning angrily. He picked up his cap, tossed it on his head and went out.

"Doesn't take much brains to laugh," he muttered as he went.

"Oho!" cried the old man, his eyes twinkling.

"He needs his ears tweaked," said Shakir with an impatient wave of his hand.

"Why? We'll tweak his brains for him."

Uncle Mark got up easily, stretched, and said:

"What about some tea?"

May the Lord give peace to his soul, murmured Kozhemyakin, crossing himself. Then he took up his notebook and again lost himself in his memories.

"Uncle Mark treats everyone he meets as if he had known him all his life, and looks him straight in the eye as much as to say:

" 'Don't be afraid of me, friend; I've known lots of people worse than you. Tell me what's worrying you.'

"And they do tell him, all of them, especially Maxim. Once the boy said to him:

" 'I don't trust people, none of them tell the truth, even their kindness is a bluff. I don't want to have anything to do with them.'

"Uncle Mark just laughed.

" 'Don't want to have anything to do with them, don't you? Don't be in such a hurry to start crowing; you're only a young cockerel yet.'

"Maxim was offended, but his sullenness seems to be fading like calico in the sun, and he is not so cheeky as he used to be.

"Last night Uncle Mark told Shakir about a Tatar book he had read, and I wrote down some sayings from it:

" 'Grip the laws of God in strong and powerful hands and throw out the laws of ignorance.'

" 'Soon everything will disappear, leaving nothing but the good deeds that have been done.'

"Maxim broke in on the reading and insisted that Russian preachers were wiser than Tatar ones, but Uncle Mark instantly damped his fire by saying:

" 'Didn't you say last time that you didn't believe in devils?'

" 'I don't.'

" 'I see. The eminent Russian writer Seraphim Svyatogorets said: "If we deny the existence of demons we must deny all Holy Writ and the Church itself, and for such free thinking anathema is pronounced on the first Sunday of Lent." How do you like that, heretic?'

"The boy winced and said sullenly:

" 'He must be the only one who ever said such a thing.'

"But Uncle Mark promised to show him a dozen other writers who said the same.

" 'Give me that Seraphim to read,' said Maxim.

"The old man laughed.

" 'Why, don't you believe me?'

" 'It's *him* I don't believe,' said Maxim huffily.

"But this time he did not run away. And Shakir, the old Tatar devil, was so happy that he beamed all over and rewarded the old man with a gaze fonder than any he had bestowed even on Yevgenia Petrovna. A man with a sound mind and a kind heart is very great and beautiful and can, without exaggeration, be likened to spring sunshine."

"The days fly past with amazing swiftness, and each one leaves a good memory of itself; a thing I could not have said a short while ago.

"A clerk from police headquarters came to see me and took me aside to reproach me with having given lodgings to another suspicious character.

" 'But he's got to live somewhere,' I said.

"He questioned me about what the old man says and does, but I reassured him and gave him three rubles, and even saw him to the gate. I could hardly keep myself from saying to him:

" 'You policemen would do better to watch what you yourselves do, especially on market day. You keep your eye on clean, honest people, but your own noses are always snotty. A fine example you are!'

"I will not tell Uncle Mark about his visit, it made me feel ashamed of our townsfolk. Once in a blue moon a decent man appears here, and the very sight of him turns their stomachs.

"Yesterday I heard him asking the workmen about folk-songs and proverbs, and later when we were having tea he said to me:

" 'A proverb is a great thing, the wisdom of the people

is beaten up stiff as butter in it. For instance: "Captain Fatbelly in war becomes Flatbelly in peace." Or this: "It's heads, not houses, that make a town." These sayings were invented when people still appreciated the worth of the mind. Times changed, and people said: "The club and the purse have taken the place of the mind." "The town's a good place to keep away from." Observe that these sayings seem to have been invented by two entirely different kinds of people. One sort is bold and astute, the other is shrewd but cowed, and a bit of a toady.'

"He seems to know hundreds of proverbs. I suppose if one pondered every word spoken by man one would come to understand everything, but I have always gone about with my mouth open, gazing over the tops of people's heads, and that's what has made me the idiot I am."

"He, like Yevgenia, was exiled to Siberia. Before his exile he was the Father Superior of a religious seminary where he was arrested for reading forbidden books. His life has been very complicated, I can't make out how many times he was in jail and I am ashamed to ask, he does not like to talk about himself; he always does so reluctantly and ironically, and there is something about his irony I do not like, it depresses me. I suppose his restlessness is the result of having spent so much time cooped up, he cannot sit still for five minutes at a stretch. He has amusing habits, for instance, he holds the ends of his beard over his mouth and blows a cloud of tobacco smoke through them and sniffs it, this seems to give him great pleasure. He always scratches his head in the same spot over the left ear with the little finger of his right hand, and he keeps hitching up his trousers like a little boy getting ready to enter a game.

"He knows everything. White Star, one of our horses, fell ill and he undertook to cure her, and in four days she was well. I saw her turn a grateful eye on him and lick his ear affectionately—a pretty picture.

" 'None of your tricks, missy!' he said to her. 'Do you call yourself a horse? You're a cat, a pussy-cat, that's what you are!' and he stuck out his tongue at her. A queer bird! White Star could see he loved her, so she just bared her teeth in what looked like a grin and went on playing with him.

"What a pleasure it is to be near a good man! Even the beasts understand and love a good man, yet we send such a one to Siberia and put him in jail. Who can understand it? There is no understanding it. We throw people away as a drunken beggar throws away a gold coin given him by mistake. Never having seen gold before, the beggar does not know its worth."

"Today Mark told us what foreigners wrote about us Russians in ancient times. One of the Greek kings said: 'The Slavs guard their honour and freedom so jealously that no power on earth can make them bend the knee.' The Arabs too were very flattering, so were the Norwegians and others, all of them said the Slavs were clever, industrious and daring, but later all these qualities disappeared and the people seemed to change. Frederick, the German king, said they were a 'stupid, drunken, suspicious, and miserable race.' One of the foreign ambassadors wrote: 'The people are used to a state of subservience and to truckling to those who do them harm in a degrading, inhuman way.' Another ambassador wrote: 'The Russians have no self-respect.' And a third: 'Those in power can do whatever they like with them; they understand nothing and take no interest in anything; they are drunken and lazy, and they live as in a dream.'

"With sorrow and resentment I copied out seventeen flattering opinions from olden times and twenty-two scathing ones from later times. Why I should have done this I do not know. It seems very strange to me that some Russians should agree with those who insult us: Tiunov, for instance,

and one-eyed Alexei, and even Maxim. Uncle Mark is very good to Maxim, treats him almost like a son, but I am afraid he is sowing seeds on stony soil.

"After this talk Uncle Mark and I drank some wine and home-brewed beer and both of us got a little tipsy; he sang some old Russian songs in his bass voice and again it was as if two entirely different peoples had written the songs: one gay and freedom-loving, the other gloomy and inert. He sang and wept and so did I; I wept a lot and am not the least ashamed of it."

"Maxim reads Uncle Mark's books day and night, he has lost weight and neglects his work; yesterday he forgot to close the damper on the stove and Mark and I shivered with cold all night. But what does that matter so long as he learns what is right? But I have not the strength to read; I listen, listen hard, and it gives me a good feeling, but I cannot take in all I hear. I am afraid it is too late for you to absorb wisdom, Matvei."

"'The thing is,' he said today, only an hour ago, 'the thing is there are so many poor downtrodden creatures on this earth as well as so many stupid and vicious ones that as long as they exist you can rack your brains and lie and fool yourself as much as you like, but you'll never make life worth living for anybody. Hemmed in by all this wretched suffering, the only sort of life that's possible is the life of a thief, built on lies; or the life of a beast, that bares its fangs and casts furtive glances about. Instead of devoting our time to developing a love of reason, goodness, and beauty, we spend it in defending ourselves against the hungry and the destitute, for you have to keep a sharp eye on them and they have to be told hypocritically: "Accept your dirt and your want with meek resignation for there is no way out." But gradually they stop believing us and say: "But *you* seem to have found a way out." To which we

reply: "What does that signify? All men are mortal and the Kingdom of God is not of this world." But their doubts are not satisfied. So far they have kept them to themselves, but the day will come when they will pronounce them openly, and then evil days will be upon us.'

"These words threw light on my whole life and shocked me by their very simplicity; my heart, withered with longing, opened up to him and I began to tell him about myself.

" 'Soon it will be forty years since I was born into this world,' I said, 'and not a single happy man have I met. There was a time when I blamed people, but now that I am getting on in years I feel sorry for them.'

"He winked and said:

" 'You pity the good ones because they suffer and the bad ones just because they're bad, is that it?'

"He has the knack of always finding the right word for things.

" 'But pity is a tricky sort of feeling,' he said. 'Once a man shows pity he imagines he has done all he can or ought to do; having shown pity he is satisfied, and everything remains just as it was. It's a graveyard feeling, pity is; only the dead deserve it, the living are harmed and insulted by it.'

"All day long, from early morning till late at night, the rumble of a deep bass voice is heard in my quiet home, a bald pate is seen now here, now there, clouds of fragrant tobacco smoke hover in the air, and from between a pair of lips no longer young flows a stream of bright new words.

"I am deeply touched. On going to bed at night I thank God the Father for the beauty of this man whom He has created."

"Maxim, the red-haired devil, has caused such a row that I am afraid he will find himself in jail. He gave one of Uncle Mark's books to Vasya Savelyev, son of Yefim, the tavern-keeper, and Yefim found it and threw it into the stove, and then he gave his son such a beating that he is

still in bed. Yesterday Maxim went to the tavern and pulled Yefim's hair and ears. That boy can't even fight as he ought to. Who ever heard of pulling a grown man's ears? Push him, strike him, but don't pull his ears! He never does anything like anybody else and is always putting on airs. Yefim came here with his ears bandaged, he was followed by the police and there was a lot of noise and swearing. Yefim shook all over and shouted at the top of his voice:

" 'Freemasons! Heretics!'

"Maxim, livid with rage, or perhaps fright, just stood and said nothing.

" 'You'll have to look for another master,' I said.

"Still he said nothing, as if his mouth was stuffed with potatoes.

"For some reason Shakir lost his temper. He turned white, his eyes flashed, and he shouted at Yefim:

" 'Why did you throw the book in the fire? Books are sacred, God gives books, how dare you burn books? *You're* the one ought to go to jail for that.'

"Yefim seemed shocked by this, he grew quieter (the Tatar is greatly respected by the townsfolk for his honesty; nobody can understand him), but even so they wrote everything down and dragged Maxim off to police headquarters where they cross-examined him and now he goes about looking blacker than night. They are sure to arrest him.

"Uncle Mark pointed out to him that it was wrong and useless to give a person a beating because it just frightens him without teaching him anything. At first Maxim listened to him with his eyes glued to his face like leeches, then the colour mounted his cheeks, his eyes took on a hard glitter, and he muttered:

" 'He's a beast and I will always fight the likes of him.'

"Whenever he is worsted in argument he walks away with his red head thrown back and his teeth clenched. That is what he did this time.

"Uncle Mark blew out a cloud of smoke after him.

" 'He's a relentless lad,' he said. 'It will go hard with those who have dealings with him.'

"He went on to say that Russians have no sense of proportion, they do not know how to use power in moderation; if someone who has suffered oppression comes to power he is sure to oppress others and become a tyrant. He spoke of Ivan the Great and Avvakum and Arakcheyev and other men famous for their cruelty. They used to torture people with the tears running down their cheeks.

" 'Perhaps they tortured them because they had such a fierce longing to do good, and perhaps they wept because they did not know what good was or how to set about doing it.'

"That is an excellent habit of his: always pointing out the good that may lie behind the bad and showing that the thing that causes the most trouble is the cast-iron stupidity of human beings.

"He spoke at length and very kindly about Avvakum, but I heartily dislike the archpriest: where people were concerned he was brutally fanatic and in relation to God he was vain and conceited. 'God,' he said, 'has seen fit to lodge heaven and earth and all its creatures within me.' There's conceit for you!

"I said as much to Uncle Mark, who looked at me gravely.

" 'There's some truth in what you say,' he admitted. 'The mad priest did much to bring about our ruin. Owing to his ignorance and mistakes much harm was done to our people, they were driven into the dark corner in which they have been cowering for almost three centuries, nursing their wrongs and aware of nothing else.'

"Yevgenia's observations are childish compared with his, his mind reaches down into the very depths of the human soul. I suppose that is why when he says hard things his eyes are as sad and gentle as a father's. I find it strange that he never goes to see the priest and the priest has only been to see us twice, both times on Saturday after vespers. He

and Uncle Mark sat almost until morning talking about the mind, the soul and God. I felt that the priest was dissatisfied with God and afraid of Him, but Uncle Mark spoke of Him without fear.

" 'Look upon God,' he said, 'as the mind of the world, which has not yet found fitting expression in us imperfect human beings. That will make everything simpler and more majestic.'

"What the priest says is bookish and hard for me to understand; he throws himself about, excited and untidy, gesticulates as if beckoning to one thing and thrusting away another, and I can see Uncle Mark winces at the sight of him, and says softly and sternly:

" 'Don't be so involved, let your thinking be simpler.'

"Their arguments are hot, but Uncle Mark always gets the better of the priest, who fumes and blusters and leaps about and then falls into a reverie. Once he sprang up, seized Uncle Mark by the shoulder, and said:

" 'You *are* a good sort, so clever and generous!'

"Uncle Mark stopped him.

" 'Don't be so free with your praise. Remember what Bishop Sinezy said about praise? "Praise is flattering but injurious, it is like the poison mixed with honey offered to those doomed to die.'

"I liked this, only I did not understand about the poison, so he told me the story of the philosopher Socrates who was poisoned by the people for denying the existence of God. How important knowledge is! Everything that happened in the past is interesting and teaches you something, and here am I like a mole, cut off from the light of day.

"On both occasions when the priest came he was followed by his wife, who sat in the corner like a sentry with her arms folded over her flat breast, saying nothing, only getting up from time to time and going cautiously over to the window to peer out into the darkness. Uncle Mark laughed at her, and once he said:

"'Have no fear, you won't find anybody there.'

"'It's no laughing matter,' she said, turning round.

"I wondered what she had in mind but I lacked the courage to ask."

"Matushkina died (the paymaster's wife) and today was the funeral, almost the whole town followed the coffin to the graveyard. Strangely enough it turned out that everybody had known her even if she lived such a secluded life and I heard many kind and sympathetic things said about her on the way to the graveyard. The paymaster walked directly behind the coffin all hunched up, he dragged his feet and hung his head as if ready for the knife or the axe, his face was red, his eyes were swollen and he looked like a wild boar. Lyuba walked beside him in an old squirrel coat and sealskin cap; she looked so desolate I could not bear to let my eyes rest on her; she did not cry, just pressed her lips together tightly, and her face was as white as a sheet. I bowed to her as we were leaving the cemetery and she seemed to be pleased, but her father took her by the arm and growled at me:

"'Who are you?'

"'Kozhemyakin. I often see you at the treasury office and I'm acquainted with your daughter.'

"'You've spoiled her for me,' he growled and drew her after him. As he pulled her splashing through the puddles she looked like a slender branch springing out of a thick trunk and blown by the wind. It was a sad sight. I wonder what will become of her now?

"Our people love a funeral; the minute anybody of the least importance dies the whole town turns out as if on holiday to follow the coffin; they seem to enjoy it. I suppose it is only natural, even a funeral is a relief when life is as dull as ours."

"It is March already, yesterday was St. Alexei's day, the

torrents should have been rushing down the hills but everything was frozen. The sky, however, wears the brightness of spring and today Uncle Mark and I took a walk in the town. He told me about the struggles and hardships the Russian people had been through, he deeply loves the people and makes others love them (and love him as well). Maxim is like a different person, he has become kind and gentle and smiles all the time as if he was in love, but he has become more absent-minded than ever and that is all because of the books; he devours books like a colt devours grass in the spring.

"I can see that Uncle Mark prefers him to me; he talks to him oftener and with more pleasure. I hope the boy does not get a swelled head.

"Yesterday Uncle Mark said to him jovially:

" 'Our bodies have been beaten but our souls are sound, though they haven't come out into the light as yet; they've been crouching in monasteries, in the wilderness, in dark corners, in drunkenness, dissoluteness, and vagrancy. Spiritually all of us are still adolescent and life stretches ahead, vast and unexplored. But have no fear, friends, we shall come out into the light! Mother Russia will yet rise to her feet if we just have faith in her, for all good things are achieved through faith. Once we have faith we can move mountains.'

"I cannot get him out of my mind. He seems to know some great happiness; at some time in his life he must have experienced a great and fearful joy that kindled a fire in him which has never gone out and to this day sheds light on others and will go on shedding it as long as he lives.

"I liked what he said to Maxim yesterday:

" 'We ought not to sneer at one another, we ought to take one another trustingly by the hand and work quietly side by side to the glory of our motherland. It is high time we learned to love this long-suffering Russia of ours.'

"I was glad to hear him say this. It is true that we sneer at one another and each is interested only in improving his own conditions at the expense of his neighbour, and that is why enmity and dissension reign everywhere. Sometimes as I lie in bed at night my soul is filled with revolt and I want to rush out and shout:

" 'Brothers! Take pity on our Russia, an ancient land born of the blood and bones of our forefathers!' "

"Vasya Savelyev has disappeared; for three days they have been searching for him. Yefim is beside himself, he came running into my house shaking all over and foaming at the mouth.

" 'It's you heretics who have done this to him!' he shouted. 'You must know where he is, Maxim! Speak up!' And he flung his cap on the floor.

"Maxim's face darkened, he glared at Yefim like a wolf, but said nothing. On the eve of Vasya's disappearance he had been to see a seamstress named Gorushina with whom I am not acquainted; Yefim rushed to her house, cursed her and hit her, but people say he had no reason to: Maxim knows her, he says she is young but very modest and not the sort to allow any liberties, even if she did let Vasya and Maxim visit her; she is friendly with the priest's wife and the priest's wife would never have anything to do with her if she was loose.

"Uncle Mark has not been himself for the last two days, he walks up and down all day long, smoking and whistling, his eyes look sunken and glittering and he has become hard of hearing: asks to have everything repeated and says it is because he has a ringing in his ears. The house is as dreary as a rainy day in autumn, the air is sharp even though the sky is blue and the sun warm. Spring is late in coming."

"Uncle Mark came up to me and said with a smile:

" 'When do you feel worse, in the autumn or the spring?'

" 'In the winter,' I said.

" 'It's spring that gets me down. As soon as the sky clears something starts tugging at my heart, I have a longing to pull up stakes and set off, walking past towns and villages, on and on, to the very end of the world.'

"I looked at him but could find nothing to say. Thank goodness he cannot go away from here, the law demands that he must stay in our town for two years."

"Suddenly the sun brought warmth and in two days the ground thawed; last night the ice broke on the Putanitsa and Vasya's body was found under the bridge. It was badly mutilated but no one knows yet whether he threw himself in or was thrown in by somebody. The police blame Yefim and questioned him but he is so grief-stricken that his mind wanders and they could get nothing out of him. Maxim folds his hands behind his back and says nothing, he is like someone in a daze, hazy-eyed and with clenched teeth.

"Uncle Mark went to see the priest at midday yesterday and spent the night there, he probably intends staying tonight too, for it is almost ten o'clock and he has not come home yet."

"At Vasya's funeral I saw Gorushina, she was walking arm in arm with Lyuba Matushkina. There is nothing unusual about her except her clothes, which are very simple and pretty.

"The priest invited me to go home with him, and Gorushina and Lyuba went too. We had tea and Uncle Mark said it would be a good thing if we opened a theatre in our town. A little later the priest's wife played beautifully on the harmonium and Lyuba burst into tears and they all went into the other room. Gorushina seems to be on intimate terms with the priest's wife and the priest calls her Dunya, she is probably a relative of some sort. As soon as the priest was left alone with Uncle Mark and me he began

to talk about God. Standing in the middle of the room with a frown on his face, he drew himself up, lifted one arm and tossed back his long hair. His uncle was curt and impatient with him.

"'By attributing action and desire to God you invest Him with our human qualities,' said the priest, 'and you destroy His oneness.'

"'Old stuff', growled Uncle Mark.

"'But wait! How can God desire anything when He Himself is everything, and how can God act, to what end can He direct His activity, when nothing exists outside Him?'

"'That's Oriental thinking, Sasha, drop it. We've been all through that,' said his uncle.

"'And what if I have not been through it? What if for me it is still a racking problem?'

"'You just imagine it,' said his uncle, then, turning to me, he suggested we should go home. The priest dived into a corner and curled up in an armchair, evidently he was hurt because he held his hand out to me without a word and did not so much as nod to his uncle.

"On the way home I asked Uncle Mark, who was still gloomy, what the trouble was, and he readily explained to me.

"'The trouble is that he lacks simple, unshakable faith, and so he tries to invent it, but you can't invent what doesn't exist.'

"When we reached the gate he added:

"'The same thing everywhere: we are drawn to the Orient, to Oriental serenity and a justification of inertia. That only makes action all the more essential.'

"When we were inside he told me that once the priest had told his Father Confessor that he was tortured by doubts, and his confessor had reported it to the bishop. Even before this the priest had been suspected of free thinking; as a punishment he was sent to the church in our town and now his wife lives in fear and trembling lest he be sent

to a monastery. That is why she is always sounding a warning: 'Sasha! Sasha!'

"He told me this in a dull tone and the story itself is a dull one. The priest despaired and confessed, his confessor listened and reported him, and as a result the priest was cast upon our poor Okurov like leavings thrown to a dog."

A few days after Vasya's funeral Uncle Mark and Kozhemyakin were sitting on a bench outside the gate gazing up into the clear dome of the sky with the gilded cross of the cathedral belfry glowing like hot metal at its heart.

"How can that be?" Uncle Mark was saying. "You've got a river and no fish?"

"Yes, and I don't know why," said Kozhemyakin with a smile.

"Well, I've come," they heard someone say apologetically.

"And a very good thing," said Uncle Mark. "Here, sit down."

Kozhemyakin half rose to greet the newcomer and sat down again, clenching the fingers that had touched the woman's soft hand.

"So you don't want to enter a complaint against the culprit?" asked Uncle Mark, screening himself in a cloud of smoke.

"Oh dear, no!" said the woman in a tone almost of entreaty. "He's been punished enough."

"'Quite right. The blessed are merciful even to the beasts.'"

"Besides, it's Lent."

"Hm. If it were not, perhaps you wouldn't allow such an attack on yourself to go unpunished?"

"What difference does it make?" she said, and took a handkerchief out of the pocket of her waist to wipe her lips as middle-class women do before kissing the cross at mass. Then, sighing, she said: "No court can bring Vasya back."

How ordinary she is! thought Matvei as he stole a cautious glance at her.

She was plump and not very tall and wore dark clothes and a dark shawl on her head which made her look like a nun. It was impossible to tell whether she was pretty or not. Her eyes were half-closed and veiled by lashes, giving the impression that she was blind. There was nothing striking about her, nothing that would set one to guessing about her life and personality, what she aspired to, whether one could put one's trust in her.

Maxim's red head appeared in the gateway. There was a momentary flash of his blue eyes, then he himself came out, threw back his head proudly, smiled, and raised his dark eyebrows.

Gorushina got up and held out her hand to him.

"Good-afternoon, Maxim Stepanovich," she said.

Maxim shook hands with her without a word and ducked back into the yard through the gate; she wiped her lips with her handkerchief again and slowly sank down on to the bench.

Looks as if there's something between them, thought Matvei indifferently. Spring's in the air.

"Shall we go inside?" he proposed half-heartedly.

"No, let's stay here," said Uncle Mark, clapping his hand on his knee.

Kozhemyakin pulled himself to his feet, yawned, gazed down the street, up at the sky that was taking on the flush of evening, and at the black hills beyond the town, then went reluctantly into the house.

Later, weighing in his mind the enormity of all his subsequent behaviour, he came to the conclusion that this was the night on which had begun the incomprehensible wilfulness that led him off the path he thought he had irrevocably chosen for himself.

Soon a little group of people began to frequent Kozhemyakin's house. They came to see and talk to Uncle Mark.

Among them were the undistinguished Gorushina and a hunchback named Senya Komarovsky, who was the son of a cathedral deacon and had been expelled from college. Later they were joined by the curly-headed pimply-faced Tsvetayev who worked for the Town Council; shabby, bald-headed, big-nosed Rogachov who was a doctor's assistant; Capitolina Galatskaya, the niece of the assistant priest at the cathedral, a boisterous girl with a red and blotched face. They gathered regularly every Saturday evening during vespers in Uncle Mark's room, or, when the weather grew warmer, in the orchard under the birches near the bath-house. Sometimes the priest's wife would join them and sit in a corner, from where she would eye them silently through her spectacles while her hands were busy with her inevitable knitting or embroidery. Maxim, too, would hang about with an independent air, stroking his red hair now with one hand, now with the other, as if rubbing in the things Uncle Mark expounded with such force and vigour. And Shakir would be sure to be standing in his skull-cap at one side, shifting his weight from foot to foot, cocking each ear in turn to catch what was being said, holding his hands behind his back, smiling a shadowy sort of smile, and it seemed as if he had come just for a moment to utter a hurried prayer before hastening back to some pressing business.

Whenever Kozhemyakin was present he would frown uneasily, nod to each newcomer without a word, step forward and take a seat at the table beside Uncle Mark, trying to look impressive and very much at his ease, but really feeling an embarrassment he could not overcome in the presence of these people.

Gradually he would become so engrossed in what Uncle Mark was saying that he would forget all about them and himself; he listened intently, laughed with the others, sighed heavily when the grim aspects of life were described, and hung his head guiltily when Uncle Mark reproached people

for their laziness, cowardice, cruelty, and ignominious tendency to reconcile themselves to anything at all. He spoke at length of these and many other humiliating aspects of the Russian character.

But when the old man grew tired and stopped speaking and his followers began cawing like crows circling round the belfry, Kozhemyakin again became conscious of himself, and then into his breast, slowly, stealthily, but with growing clarity, crept a realization of the great disparity between himself and these people.

From where he was sitting he could see them all. They were younger than he, and he found them odd and a little comical. Lanky Tsvetayev was sitting with his sharp knees sticking out, swinging his beak from side to side like a sleepy crow on a hot day and saying in a quavering voice that kept breaking into a shrill falsetto:

"And so we are faced with two problems: the problem of the individual and the problem of society."

He spoke with great assurance, but no one understood what he was trying to say. He kept closing his eyes and drawing signs in the air with one finger, and at last, putting his hand to his forehead, he fell into a reverie.

"Have you finished?" Uncle Mark asked him.

"There's just one more question. . . ."

And again all eyes were turned to his pimply face and Uncle Mark drummed on the table with his fingers and moved his thick eyebrows up and down impatiently.

When Tsvetayev finished speaking he was always followed by Galatskaya, who invariably began by exclaiming:

"But why should we waste time discussing separate matters?"

Her face would grow redder than ever and her mouth would open and close quickly as she poured out a stream of words that, taken together, were depressing, and taken separately were irritating. Kozhemyakin looked about him uneasily. His eyes fell on the priest's wife, whose head was

sinking lower and lower over her work as her indifference to her surroundings increased. He felt that her smooth grey head was filled with harsh, true, but circumspect thoughts, and this comforted him.

As soon as Galatskaya stopped speaking Tsvetayev and Rogachov began arguing with her, the former in a shrill, injured voice, the latter in a genial bass with a marked Volga accent.

"But that's beside the point," he said.

He looked like a tool that has been much used. Sturdy, broad-shouldered, he had a sort of "second-hand" head with worn-down features and small, watery eyes, his movements were loose and approximate, something rasped inside his chest, and he was often seized by fits of coughing.

Senya Komarovsky rarely spoke. With his head between his hunched shoulders, his hands thrust into his pockets and his short legs sticking out, he would sit gazing at everyone with round, unblinking eyes. From time to time his thin lips would spread in a broad grin which Kozhemyakin found unpleasant. He tried not to look at the hunchback, but this only made him look the more, goaded by curiosity.

Gorushina listened to the arguments and speeches with her round mouth open, her vapid eyes blinking and her breath coming in deep gasps as though she were sucking in the speaker's words.

Maxim's frowning face stood out as a bright spot against this drab background. As he raised first one hand and then the other to smooth down his hair he gave the impression that he was slowly and carefully climbing an invisible ladder. Whenever his blue eyes fell on Gorushina they grew dark and moist and his nostrils quivered. Seeing this, Kozhemyakin said to himself:

The puppy! Here they are trying to put some sense into his head, but he has other things to think about!

Komarovsky's dark eyes, too, fell on the face and figure

of the woman from time to time. At such moments the irises seemed to dilate and swallow up the whites.

Like an owl's eyes, thought Kozhemyakin.

All the people gathered here behaved in a free and easy manner, and almost every speech called forth dozens of protests. At first this surprised Matvei.

How many ideas people have! he thought almost in ecstasy. He found encouragement in this abundance of simple, comprehensible ideas, offering easy solutions to life's complicated problems; they inspired him with faith in people and the power of the mind, and with respect for people's good intentions. He was gratified that there were so many serious-minded young folk in his town and that such bold remarks should be spoken in his own house. He was no longer frightened by the sharp things they said; it was only when Capitolina Galatskaya opened her big mouth that he bowed his head apprehensively, trying not to look at her and secretly wishing someone would interrupt the stormy rush of her words.

He wrote in his notebook:

"In appearance Capitolina is harmless enough and seems a simple soul, but no one speaks as recklessly as she does, she makes you think that anger and misery are the only motive forces in life. She speaks with undisguised pleasure of the famine that is expected this year, and according to her the worse a man lives the better it is; the more a man suffers, the more good it does him. If it is true that only misfortune can awaken a man's soul, it is a bitter truth, one that is hard to hear and accept, and it is only natural that many people deny it and say it is better for a man to live on in a trance than to wake up to torture. Awake or asleep, everything ends in death, as the hunchback Komarovsky so truly observed.

"What is more, Capitolina is an ill-mannered wench, she hardly ever calls me by name, simply saying 'the merchant

here,' or 'the owner.' I could pay her back by calling her some nasty name—'the dunce,' for instance—but I am not the only one she insults and rubs the wrong way. I have noticed she has a weakness for grey cats, whenever she sees a grey kitten her face lights up and she becomes more amiable, but she seems ashamed of it.

"It is very hard to understand her and I can never go up to her and talk simply and confidentially; she always starts shouting and sneering. She dresses in a slovenly way but not poorly, her waists are always stained with sweat under the arms and most of the hooks are off, so that you can see underneath, and as I look at her I wonder who could ever love her, I do not suppose anyone ever will."

Once he got used to these people and was drawn into the circle of their thinking, he, too, wanted to express his ideas and tell them what he thought was wrong with their arguments. At first hesitantly and self-consciously, then more boldly and insistently, he took part in the discussions.

"May I say a word?" he would ask, half rising from his chair and feeling his heart thump and the blood drain from his face.

On receiving Uncle Mark's kindly nod of permission, he would launch into a discourse couched in pompous language and reiterating one and the same thing:

"I do not doubt but that you who are gathered here are most sincerely devoted to the welfare of our motherland, and yet because of differences of opinion on how best to serve the cause you become involved in such heated arguments that you insult each other. This to my mind is very wrong and a great hindrance to understanding the various thoughts expressed, and I would ask you to try to be more patient and gentle with one another. It seems a great pity that such . . . er . . . exceptional people, if I may put it so, should come together to work for the common good only to hurt each other's feelings. . . ."

Sometimes he himself was so moved by what he said and by the love for his fellow-men that welled up in his heart that it was all he could do to hold back the tears. This had an effect upon his hearers, who would laugh self-consciously and gaze at him with affection while Uncle Mark smiled approvingly through a cloud of smoke.

"Very true," would be the comment, spoken sometimes in a jocular tone, sometimes in a quiet and sorrowful one.

They don't answer back when I speak, Kozhemyakin thought to himself with a certain feeling of pride.

One day he was encouraged to expand his speech.

"And this is the second thing I wanted to say," he said. "Capitolina Petrovna here, and in fact all of you, though to a lesser extent, keep attacking the merchants and the gentry and all the rich folk, accusing them of being greedy and avaricious. Quite true. And yet *gospodin* Tsvetayev has proved to us, just as Mark Vasilyevich always points out, that a man is a victim of circumstances and he can never be anything but what life has made him. And so when you pass judgement on him and blame him for what he does, don't forget that he is not a free agent but lives the sort of life fate has decreed he shall, and so he must be shown the roots of his error and the wrongness of his life, be shown them lovingly and patiently, without hurting his feelings, so to speak, but with a sense of brotherhood, and then it will be of benefit to him and everybody else. . . ."

He tried to speak as gently and inoffensively as he could, but he heard Galatskaya give a little snort, and although everyone still wore a self-conscious look, it was not the same as before. Their faces had become long and morose and Mark Vasilyevich's expression was as inscrutable as that of an Orthodox patriarch. He averted his eyes and pulled on his pipe harder than ever.

However, they did not interrupt him. Whenever Tsvetayev's eyes met Galatskaya's he would smile and she would pull a wry face. Noticing this, Kozhemyakin hurried to con-

clude and this made him get tangled-up in his words. When his speech was over someone commented:

"By and large what you say is true, of course."

Rogachov was usually more responsive and kindly than the others, but on this occasion he seemed to have forgotten how to say anything but:

"Yes, indeed."

After a few such oratorical efforts Kozhemyakin noticed that his words no longer met with flattering attention. They never gave rise to discussion and the impatience with which his hearers waited for him to finish increased noticeably. When he stopped speaking they would nod to him and say hurriedly:

"Yes, yes."

"More or less true, no doubt—I suppose. . . ."

The time came when Galatskaya and Tsvetayev began interrupting him.

"We've heard all that before," they would say.

More than once Uncle Mark had to interfere:

"Come, let him finish."

Kozhemyakin was hurt and perplexed.

They don't even listen to me, let alone argue with me, he thought. *They* talk as much as they like, but they haven't the patience to hear me out.

And then one day Maxim, without even rising to his feet, made an extraordinary speech that was even more arrogant than usual.

"You don't seem to notice, Matvei Savelyevich, that you keep on saying the same thing over and over again, and always in defence of your class, but it's not the merchants that suffer most; on the contrary, it's them who make the rest of the people suffer."

He looked very grim and handsome, and as his voice mounted his hearers grew quieter. Kozhemyakin, his head lowered self-consciously, watched the people. All of them except the hunchback and the priest's wife were looking at

Maxim. The hunchback's eyes, whose dark irises were shrunken and framed by bluish-white rings, were glued to Matvei's face as if waiting to catch his glance; the priest's wife had put down her work and was sitting with her hands folded in her lap, staring over her spectacles at the ceiling.

Maxim finished what he had to say and ran his fingers through his hair.

"Good, quite right," said Galatskaya, wriggling excitedly on the sofa. "And what have you to say to that, merchant?"

Uncle Mark's heavy breathing, signifying his disapproval, was the only sound to be heard.

Kozhemyakin got up, his hands on the table, and said, unable to suppress his anger:

"You express yourself in a way no decent man wants to hear, Maxim. . . ."

This was met by a low murmur of protest.

"Softly, Matvei Savelyevich, softly," said Uncle Mark with gentle severity.

"There's nothing for me to make a lot of noise about," exclaimed Matvei, stung by the hostile buzzing. "What he says is untrue. As if I cared a fig for my class! I live all by myself, laughed-at and suspected by my neighbours; everybody knows that. What I tried to say was only that if we say everybody's equal, then everybody's equally to blame and is to be equally judged, that's what I say. And if it's true that even a thief steals out of necessity, it's all the more true of the merchant class."

Galatskaya gave a loud and shameless guffaw, Tsvetayev snorted and an ugly smile spread slowly over the hunchback's face. Matvei went cold, stammered, stopped speaking and slumped heavily into his chair.

"Wait!" said Uncle Mark, instantly silencing all the voices. He launched into a mild conciliatory speech, but Kozhemyakin did not follow what he said, he merely sur-

rendered himself unhappily to the sound of the voice and to his own sense of injury.

They think more of that puppy than they do of me, he thought.

That evening he wrote in his notebook:

"Today Maxim showed what a brazen fellow he is, he took a stand against me in front of everybody, denying what I had said at great length, and they were all for him and against me. Naturally I took it badly; surely it is beneath me to argue with my own workman in my own house. Mark Vasilyevich, who is in charge of all this, should have seen how out of place it was and should not have let him speak. I should not have minded if it had been Shakir, a man well on in years and with great moral weight, but Maxim is so young and like a bell that rings whenever you shake it. I understand, of course, that Mark Vasilyevich puts more store by ideas than people, but who did Maxim get his ideas from? All our ideas are the same, and the source of them for all of us is the same: Mark Vasilyevich. He is very busy these days, hardly ever stays at home, goes walking in the fields till late at night, so I have had no chance to talk to him for a long time. And again I feel out of things, like a wart on somebody else's nose."

May was over almost before it had begun—a hot dry month that year. The orchard put out green leaves, the lilac bloomed, a chiffchaff sang and a robin redbreast flashed among the young foliage. The scents of spring made people giddy and a sweet languor dulled the mind.

People were tempted to go out into the country beyond the town where larks were singing above the green hills and the river and woods were looking festive. Uncle Mark's friends began to gather in the orchard near the bath-house, in the shade of the birches, round a table on which a samovar stood. Sometimes on Sundays they would go right

across the fields to a high spot on the other side of a ravine, called The Mouse's Hump. From there they had a view of the town, which seemed to be painted in pastel shades on the landscape.

"She looks pretty from here, the harpy!" laughed Senya Komarovsky one day. "Like a thief in the market all dressed up outwardly, but stinking rotten within."

Avdotya Gorushina gazed at him with her vapid eyes and observed placidly:

"There are good people to be found everywhere."

"And every shop sells vinegar," said the hunchback without looking at her.

She sighed and turned to Matvei.

"I don't understand that, about vinegar," she said.

This was perhaps the first time she had ever spoken to him directly, and it made him happy.

"Senya likes to speak in riddles," he laughed.

"You're not expected to understand anything," said the hunchback, narrowing his eyes at her sternly. "You're only expected to get married."

"Dear me, what a thing to say!" she exclaimed, blushing and dropping her eyes.

"Isn't that so, Matvei Savelyevich?" asked the hunchback.

"It all depends on whom she marries," said Matvei. "Naturally marriage, for a young woman—"

At this point Galatskaya came up waving her handkerchief. On hearing what was being said she made a face.

"Pooh! How very commonplace!" she said, and declared with great spirit that life demanded self-sacrifice.

"What do you take life for? An old beggar-woman who accepts any old bone that's thrown to her?" said Senya slurringly when she had finished.

Galatskaya went red with rage and shouted at him, and Matvei thought to himself:

Why is he always so rude when Gorushina is present? If he's sweet on her, that won't help him.

And he let his eyes roam over the young, supple body of Gorushina, who was sitting next to him.

A week later he heard someone whisper in the orchard:

"Leave me alone—don't touch me. . . ."

"What difference does it make now?" came Maxim's voice.

Kozhemyakin started, leaned out of the window, and again heard the woman's voice, this time hesitant and imploring:

"A thing like this—you know what the people here are like. . . ."

"I can't help what I feel," replied Maxim distinctly, insistently and almost angrily.

The buck! exclaimed Matvei to himself, and before he knew it he had called Maxim. Instantly he sprang away from the window and began to pace the floor, saying to himself in fright:

Why did I do that? What business is it of mine?

When Maxim appeared in the doorway he asked in embarrassment:

"Is the—er—samovar ready?"

"Not yet."

"Why not? Somebody's come, it seems."

"Avdotya Gorushina."

Kozhemyakin gazed steadily at him and noticed that the porter's face was drawn and thin but wore an expression of even greater independence and resolution.

He'll get her, he thought sadly, turning away. He'll make her yield to him.

"Well, be off with you," he said with a wave of his hand.

And again he thought angrily, standing in the middle of the room:

Why can't he take up with the cook? She's still got some sap in her and that's the accepted thing: the yard porter usually lives with the cook. But not he. He has to fly high, that one.

He glanced at himself in the looking-glass, heaved a sigh, and went out into the orchard, possessed of a vague and unfamiliar restlessness.

Gorushina was sitting on a bench under an apple-tree. She was wearing a pale blue waist and a grey skirt and had let her white silk kerchief slip off her head on to her shoulders. Pink spots of sunlight played over her fair hair and silk kerchief; she was touching her cheek with a birch twig as she gazed pensively up at the sky, moving her lips as if in prayer.

Kozhemyakin greeted her and sat down beside her.

How quiet and submissive she is, he thought. She's sure to give in to him.

Bees were buzzing, and the sound bored into his chest and head, giving rise to unexpected thoughts.

"You're a widow, aren't you?" he asked softly.

"Been one for almost three years."

"Were you married long?"

"A year and five months."

She replied unhurriedly, but immediately, without stopping to consider, and he fancied that her words were sifted through the meshes of a single thought that drained them of all colour. She told him in a flat, monotonous voice, as if what she was saying had nothing to do with herself, that when she had been only seventeen her father, the night-watchman of a public building, had made her marry one of the officials employed there. Soon after her marriage her husband had taken to drink and had dropped dead in the street, frightened by a dog that had pounced on him.

"Was he kind to you?" asked Kozhemyakin sympathetically.

"I hardly know," she mused, then, catching herself, she smiled prettily and explained: "I had no chance to find out; he was always either drunk or ill; his heart and liver were bad and he was out of temper most of the time, not

because of me but because of his illness, and then, all of a sudden, they brought him home dead."

"So you had no real life with him at all?"

She broke the birch twig in two and tossed it at the feet of Senya, who came up to them just at this moment, doffing his crumpled, greasy cap.

"I was afraid I'd be late," he said in a voice that did not inspire trust. He shook hands and sat down on the other side of Gorushina: too close to her, thought Kozhemyakin.

He was followed by Tsvetayev and Galatskaya. Kozhemyakin went over to the table and caught sight of Maxim, who was sitting on the porch of the bath-house gazing into the sky where the convent belfry rose among the lime branches with white pigeons circling below.

"No sense in it," came the tenor voice of Senya, the hunchback.

"Oh, come!" protested Tsvetayev haughtily.

"What's that, what's that?" put in Galatskaya like a clucking hen.

"All of us are to be condemned to the wilderness for forty years," went on the hunchback. "And though we perish, we shall bring forth strong men to succour the world."

Kozhemyakin laughed and said to Maxim:

"Hunchbacks are always like that—they keep mum for a long time and then come out with claptrap like this."

To his surprise Maxim said:

"He's a very clever boy."

Senya's voice rose higher and higher:

"Don't listen to them, dear! Keep on walking humbly along the path you have chosen, bringing happiness to him who is deserving of it, for you were born of God to—"

"Of God," sniggered Galatskaya.

"—to bring happiness to the chosen one; you were born to be a mother. . . ."

"Hear that?" said Maxim, getting up with a wry smile on his pale face. "Clever of him."

"Call the others," said Kozhemyakin. Without moving Maxim folded his hands behind his back and called out: "Tea's ready!"

Jealous, thought Matvei, not without satisfaction. He heaved a sigh and suddenly felt dejected.

Without interrupting their argument, the people made for the table. Senya brought up the rear, smiling maliciously and wiping his bumpy forehead. Gorushina, blushing and embarrassed, sat down next to him and Matvei fancied she was like a bride being led to the altar against her will. The argument grew hotter. Senya lunged now to the right, now to the left, twisting and biting back like a wolf at bay. Galatskaya and Tsvetayev attacked him viciously, but Maxim stood apart, his eyes fixed on the ground. Kozhemyakin would have been glad to catch the meaning of the hunchback's sharp thrusts, but his mind was occupied with thoughts of Gorushina and Maxim.

She is quiet and submissive, he kept saying to himself.

In some alarm he heard the hunchback say bitingly:

"All of you whirl round like rubbish at the cross-roads on a windy day, and you're made giddy by the whirling, but I just stand on one side and look on, and I can see—"

Galatskaya, sweating with excitement, struck the table with her hand, and Tsvetayev, red-faced and pouting, said nothing. Rogachov kept coughing, spitting profusely and mumbling:

"Enough, good people!"

"—I can see very clearly: that there is no amusement in this whirling," shouted Senya. "Not of its own accord is the dead leaf blown about by the wind . . . ."

Here Rogachov lost his temper, got up and said to Galatskaya:

"Stop it. He can't argue, he's just showing off, trying to be original."

The sun went down, the crosses on the domes of the convent churches seemed to melt in the gathering dusk and glowed with a ruddy light, cockchafers hummed above the birches, martlets called to one another as they zigzagged through the air, a shepherd played dolefully on his pipe, and everything around demanded quiet.

Why must they bring their quarrels here? thought Kozhemyakin resentfully. Aloud he said:

"What could be keeping Mark Vasilyevich?"

Gorushina started, glanced guiltily about, and murmured that Uncle Mark would not come today because Father Alexander had caught a fever and his uncle was taking care of him.

"It's no fever," scoffed Senya. "He's started on a drinking-bout."

Gorushina sighed and lowered her eyes.

A lamb, thought Kozhemyakin, glancing down at the bluish parting of her hair and longing to say something caressing to her, but just then Senya asked in the same mocking tone:

"Why do you say he has a fever when you know he's drunk?"

"Why should I say nasty things about him?" she replied.

"That's right," said Kozhemyakin.

Senya looked from him to her and asked again, with a leer:

"Do you suppose hiding the truth will change it?"

Maxim, who was standing behind Kozhemyakin, said:

"Always looking for trouble! Don't answer him, Avdotya Gavrilovna."

I suppose I ought to stand up for her, Matvei said to himself.

"Well, we're leaving," announced Galatskaya, straightening her straw hat with a red bow on it.

Tsvetayev put on his white cap as if he had a headache and the touch of the cap was painful. Rogachov shook

his shoulders like one throwing off a great weight and murmured:

"Good-bye."

And in single file they walked off down the path.

"Did you see how she looked at herself in the samovar as she straightened her hat?" asked Senya.

"Is there anything wrong in that?" said Gorushina.

"Not wrong, but ridiculous."

Gorushina threw him a hostile glance.

"It would be more ridiculous if she went about with her hat on crooked," she said.

"Oh no," drawled Senya insolently, "it's funny to see a freak looking at herself."

"It's funnier to look at a freak," said Maxim testily.

Kozhemyakin was aware that the yard porter and the hunchback were sizing each other up like two cocks before a fight: their muscles were tensed, their heads thrust forward, and they were staring at each other belligerently. Matvei was nervous, but rather amused. He looked at Gorushina. She was studying the flowers on the cup she held in her hand, apparently deaf to the thrusts of the hunchback and Maxim. Her face was pale and her vapid eyes had a filmy look. He felt as he gazed at her that she was about to go away at once and for ever, and he wanted to preserve the memory of her drooping head, plain face, innocent little mouth, thin round shoulders, small virginal breasts, and those long hands with the needle-pricked fingers.

They'll tear her to pieces and devour her, he thought, anxious to convince himself of something. These people aren't her sort.

In the quiet of the orchard, still dusted with the pink powder of sunset, the thin voice of the hunchback flowed on, breaking unwontedly into fluty notes from time to time.

"A person wants to live in peace and quiet, yes he does, that's the safest and pleasantest way and takes the least

trouble, but as soon as he tries to live such a life, some wild beast pounces on him and puts an end to it. So you see, my good friend—"

His owl-like eyes grew even rounder with derision, his face was cut into two equally disagreeable parts by a thin smile, everything about him contradicted the mildness of his tone, as if what he said had nothing to do with what he was. Maxim sensed this. He kept staring in a hostile way at the hunchback with tight lips and knitted brows.

"There are some people," went on the hunchback diffidently, "who teach that the beast always wins in the end, that the human in a man is bound to be defeated. And it's more convincing than, say, the teaching of the Gospels. It has a special appeal for people with strong fists and weak consciences. If you like I can give you a book in which their ideas are expounded very clearly and simply."

"I don't like," said Maxim.

"Oh, you don't? Very well. You can practise this teaching very successfully without any books."

Maxim approached him slowly, as if against his will; Kozhemyakin cleared his throat and glanced round in alarm and Gorushina got up unsteadily, blinked her eyes, and held out her hand to Matvei.

"Good-bye, it's time for me to go," she said.

"And for me," said the hunchback.

Maxim clicked his heels together and stood watching them leave the orchard. Gorushina, stepping gingerly, held up her skirt as if afraid it would catch on something and hold her back.

The chirping of grasshoppers filled the air, beetles droned as they caught their wings in the moist young foliage, sprouting leaves stirred on the birch-trees.

"I'm going to fetch the water," said Maxim, getting up and walking away quickly.

It's not for water he's going, but to spy on her, thought Kozhemyakin with a little laugh. Thoughts that had long

died in him revived, together with an apprehensive mistrust of people. All night long he suffered from this, and in the morning he wrote in his notebook:

"Again my soul is wounded, and it aches like a little child crying in the night with none to hear. They say: 'We must unite in the common cause,' and yet they quarrel all the time, answering every sharp word with ten others which are in turn answered by a hundred and more. They speak of friendship and the joining of forces, and yet they are always quarrelling and their hearts are set against one another. Even Mark Vasilyevich stoops to things which do not become him; whenever Tsvetayev talks about towns and factories he makes a face and does not listen, as if Tsvetayev's words carried no weight, to be sure, Tsvetayev is only half Uncle Mark's age and not always polite, but still, there are things that he has on his mind and a man's thoughts are always dear to him and ought to be respected by others. Galatskaya acts as if Tsvetayev was a priest and she was his deacon—and as a matter of fact she looks like a deacon.

"The doctor's assistant seems to be different, for the most part he sits quietly and coughs, he hardly ever gets into an argument, except with the hunchback, and always about the Bible. He declares with much spirit that the kingdom of God is within you. That seems a strange thing to me: who can say what is within a man? There are so many unexpected things within him, things that make themselves felt all of a sudden and in such a way that he himself is puzzled and at a loss to understand where they come from. The hunchback asked him fairly enough: 'How can a man have the Kingdom of God within him if he does not have reason within him?' Rogachov retorted that reason does not count, that instead of controlling life it just confuses people. How is one to take that? Is God, then, an unreasonable creature? I notice that the more people talk about God, the more difficulties and tangles they get themselves into. It would be

better for them to leave Him in peace, for their quarrels turn into something petty and ugly and unworthy of so lofty a subject. The hunchback is the worst of all, he climbs recklessly to any height, and, like a Doubting Thomas, tries to put gunpowder under everybody's beliefs, which turns them all against him. As soon as they seem to have reached agreement on something, he comes out with: 'Is it really like that?' And again the bickering begins, everything is turned upside down, Mark Vasilyevich grows angry, and Senya (the humbug!) is delighted. The doctor's assistant once shouted at him: 'Why should you join people who are in search of faith? It is *lack* of faith that poor unfortunates like you are searching for.' And in truth the hunchback plays with dread words as the devil plays with hot coals, and anyone can see that he takes pleasure in it.

"I was glad when I thought I had discovered people of a different kind in Okurov, but evidently I rejoiced too soon. What is different about them? So far only their words; they themselves are pimples like everybody else, and whenever a pimple breaks out it tries to make itself as conspicuous and painful as possible. That is exactly what the hunchback is: a pimple.

"As for Maxim, I cannot bear to think of him, he has become so bold, brazen and conceited. More attention is paid to him than to anybody else, and he struts about and preens himself in a way that turns everybody's stomach, I cannot abide him, as for Vasya, nobody knows who is responsible for his death."

During breakfast one morning Kozhemyakin was handed a note from the priest's wife asking him to come and see her.

Wants to borrow some money again, thought Matvei with weary indifference.

He dressed reluctantly, sauntered to the priest's house and found the clergyman's wife in the garden. She was bending over the strawberry plants, looking as drab as ever.

"My hands are dirty," she said by way of greeting, and spread them in front of her as if holding him off. She let down her tucked-up top skirt and stood wiping her fingers on her apron for some time, wrinkling a forehead that looked as if carved out of wood.

Kozhemyakin asked after the priest's health, and she answered curtly:

"He had a bad night, has just fallen asleep. And his uncle is lying down."

"What is his ailment?" asked Matvei, wondering if she would tell the truth.

"A Russian one—drink," she snapped, and walked away to the summer-house. There she peered at him over her spectacles and said: "Didn't Senya Komarovsky tell you?"

"No. That is, he did, but—" mumbled Kozhemyakin in embarrassment.

"You didn't believe him? Well, you should have. He has a very high opinion of you."

She sat down in a corner of the summer-house, pushed her spectacles up on her forehead, ran her myopic eyes over her visitor, considered briefly some thought that drew a sigh from her breast and said with exaggerated emphasis:

"I sent for you to tell you about Senya. He's an unfortunate creature, and that's why he's so bitter. He likes to see everybody in a distorted, ridiculous light. He takes pleasure in detecting the vulgar and the ridiculous. He looks upon that as his right and duty. . . ."

What is she driving at? wondered Kozhemyakin.

The woman raised a hand to smooth her hair as she went on talking in a monotonous tone. The walls and ceiling of the summer-house were hung with bunches of sweet-smelling herbs; thin ribbons of sun dried them and shrank them and picked out the colours of the faded flowers as they revolved slowly on their cords. Two kittens, one grey and the other ginger, were spitting at each other and turning somersaults

on the doorstep. As Kozhemyakin watched them his ears were assaulted by strange words:

"—and it's true: you ought to get married."

Kozhemyakin started.

"Who said so?" he asked quickly, getting up. "Surely not Senya?"

"Yes, Senya; and I agree with him. I've already told you that deep down he's really a very sensitive person, to say nothing of his brains. He realizes that for her—"

"For—for Avdotya Gavrilovna?" asked Kozhemyakin.

The woman pulled down her spectacles and gazed at him in silence a minute before saying:

"So you haven't been listening to me?"

"Oh, yes—I—that is—"

Her voice became crisp and instructive and she pronounced her words in an even, matter-of-fact tone.

"I have known Avdotya for a long time, we come from the same town. She's an exceptionally fine person. And Senya is right: Maxim would be the ruin of her, there's no doubt about it."

"Oh, yes," acquiesced Kozhemyakin happily.

He gazed at the priest's wife with wide-open eyes, as though in a dream, and, fearing to wake up, sat so tensely still that he got a crick in his back. The woman in the corner took on the iridescence of a peacock and her voice sounded sweet and tender.

How kind she is, and how clever, he thought as he listened to her.

"Avdotya is utterly selfless, she is convinced that she was born to serve others and anyone has a right to demand anything of her, even her life. She will yield to the first person who is at all insistent. Do you realize what that means?"

"Yes, that's true. She's wonderfully meek and modest."

"And if they came together, she and Maxim, it would be a great misfortune for them both. It's too soon for him to marry, don't you think so?"

"What is he to marry on?" exclaimed Kozhemyakin.

"Yes, there's that too."

She leaned against the wall and crossed her hands on her breast, then proceeded more calmly:

"In other words, by marrying her you would be saving two good people from a fatal mistake. And you yourself would acquire a true friend for the rest of your life."

Kozhemyakin got up hurriedly.

"Where are you going?" asked the priest's wife sharply.

"Nowhere in particular."

"For the present nobody must know about this."

"Have you spoken to—to her?"

"Not yet. I had to have your consent first."

"It was very good of you to think of this, Anna Kirillovna," said Kozhemyakin in joyful wonder. "To tell the truth, I have had my eye on her. . . ."

"I can understand that," said the woman with a little lift of her shoulders. And again she launched into a long, emphatic speech that tried her listener's patience.

"And so come to me tonight at eight o'clock for her answer," she concluded, getting up and holding out her hand.

He shook the thin hand heartily, unable to speak for the upsurge of new emotions that were pleasant because they were definite.

He felt a sweet giddiness, his heart fluttered, little hopes jostled in his brain:

So I've come to harbour at last! Father Alexander will marry us quietly and Avdotya and I will take a trip to Vorgorod. What a clever woman the priest's wife is! She sees how people should be paired. Avdotya is sure to come to love me, she's enough like me in character to be my sister. How is it I didn't think of it myself?

With a little laugh of triumph he imagined the chagrin of conceited Maxim, and mentally shook a finger at him:

Know your place, fellow!

The town was steeped in heat. Fences, walls and earth panted hotly, a haze of dust hung in the motionless air, and the sun's glare was blinding. Limp and lifeless were the branches that hung over garden walls; shadows were stifling. The streets were full of dirty, ragged peasants—women with infants in their arms, half-naked children wallowing in the dust and holding out their hands for alms.

What swarms of them! was the thought that flashed through Kozhemyakin's mind as he tossed them copper coins, trying not to hear the funereal wail of the starving and seeing, as though in a dream, their grubby hands, thin, bearded faces, and weary, hopeless eyes.

Drenched in sweat, exhausted with heat, he hurried home and took off his clothes. Then he walked up and down the room, combing his beard and stealing glances into the looking-glass, out of which a round sallow face with bags under the eyes and strands of grey hair at the temples smiled back at him affably.

By the evening he had given himself up completely to the idea of marriage; his fancy painted one scene after another of his future life, and with growing satisfaction he resolved that at last he had found what so long he had been looking for: a comfortable crevice into which he fitted.

We'll live quietly, all by ourselves, in a sort of monastery of our own, he thought.

There was one disturbing thought that tried to force its way through the close ranks of these soothing dreams, but he drove it away, unwilling to give ear to what it tried to remind him of.

At seven o'clock he was dressed for his visit to the priest's wife, but suddenly she herself put in an appearance. Plain, flat-chested and resolute as ever, she entered the room, nodded without speaking, sat down, took off her spectacles, and polished them with her handkerchief as she said in a low tone:

"We're too late."

Without grasping the meaning of her words, Kozhemyakin stood looking at her with a benign smile on his face.

She sighed and began to speak in a faded voice that was more mellow than usual, her eyes on the floor as if she were reading out of a book lying open there.

"They're already living together. Yes, unfortunately it is so, even though I warned her she would know nothing but grief if she took up with him."

"With Maxim?" asked Kozhemyakin aghast. Stunned, he sank into a chair.

"I said the same thing to her again today, but she said, 'If he needs me, it doesn't matter that it won't be for long.' Can you understand such a nature?"

"Why should she prefer him to me?" said Kozhemyakin shrugging his shoulders and filled with a cold resentment that he felt was turning into anger. "He's a good-for-nothing without so much as a stick to his name. I'll go and speak to her myself."

She put on her spectacles and gazed at him steadily a moment before she said in the voice of a tired old woman:

"Try it. One must go to any lengths, with no thought of oneself, to save a person."

"I never liked that red-haired puppy," said Kozhemyakin softly and plaintively. "I'll give him the sack tomorrow, and then we'll see!"

"You mustn't do that!" she said sharply.

"Why not? I'm the master here, I can—"

"No, you can *not*!"

He stopped, curbing his anger; he was a little frightened by her retort. The lenses of her spectacles flashed as she looked into his eyes and spoke in her usual diffuse way. He listened without understanding until he heard her say:

"Don't forget that he has a certain advantage over you: he is young and handsome and possesses a self-confidence that you lack."

It was as if this thin, dry, uncongenial woman had dealt him three blows on the chest. He found her ugly and disagreeable.

Everybody, of course, prefers him to me, he thought, swaying on his feet and casting a glance about the empty room.

"You mustn't give in to jealousy and resentment," said the tedious voice.

So great was the pressure of his contradictory thoughts that he scarcely noticed when she left. He took off his clothes, throwing them anywhere, and sat down by the window looking into the orchard, crushed, dejected, resentful and baffled by what had happened.

Was she pulling my leg or what, he thought. Lured me on, teased me, then snatched the toy away and said, "It's not for you." Raised my hopes and then: "You mustn't be jealous." Jealous? he asked himself. No, I'm not jealous; she's mad.

Yet he felt his answer was not convincing, and this led him to think of Yevgenia. He immediately placed her beside Gorushina, deliberately brought the two of them together, and in so doing achieved what he had vaguely desired: the image of Gorushina merged with that of Yevgenia, reviving in him the fierce longing for a woman that had once caused him such torture and was now quickened by recent impressions.

Mosquitoes buzzed and stung in the dark, he slapped at them languidly, his mind centred on the image of a woman who was as timid and simple as Gorushina and as beautiful and dear to him as Yevgenia had once been. As he dwelt on this he became conscious of a process of disintegration taking place within him, and of his old misery rising out of the ruins. Suddenly he jumped up, consumed by fear and rage: out in the yard someone was climbing over the fence.

It's Maxim going to her, he thought, darting about the room. Presently he rushed out into the yard in his bedroom

slippers, noiselessly drew back the bolt on the gate, lifted the latch, and plunged into the darkness of the moonless night. His heart beat wildly, he broke out in a sweat, his slippers flapped, he took them off and carried them in his hand as he crept stealthily along the fence in pursuit of the quick, firm steps he heard ahead of him.

He was completely in the grip of a feeling he had never experienced before. Tensely and pleasantly alert, with his head thrust forward, he stared into the darkness, trying to discern the sturdy form he knew so well. He crept on like a dog on the scent, stopping with a shudder at the least sound, fearful only that his presence might be detected, and suddenly he heard the brass ring on a gate clatter and a bolt screech. He stopped in surprise and listened. Maxim's steps were no longer to be heard.

She doesn't live here, he thought with a sigh of relief. Ashamed, he put on his slippers again.

He continued walking, and when he came to a little house with three windows in it he heard Tsvetayev's shrill voice rending the silence of the street:

"There's going to be a dreadful famine. . . ."

Could she be in there? Kozhemyakin asked himself, stealing like a thief past the windows.

He crossed the street diagonally, came back, and as he again passed the house he stood on tiptoe to catch a glimpse of the room. His view was impeded by the potted plants on the window-sill, between which he could see only the bent back of Rogachov and the tousled head of Galatskaya. After standing for a few minutes listening to the low hum of excited voices, he quickly set out for home, saying to himself:

Tomorrow I will go and speak to her.

That night he could not sleep for thinking of his decision and for trying to convince himself it was the right one. At dawn he heard Maxim climb back over the fence and threatened him mentally:

Just you wait, you rascal! I'll teach you to climb fences!

And he dozed off thinking:

He must be forced to leave town, otherwise Avdotya . . . she's weak in character. I'll ask the priest's wife to see to it, let her persuade him to go. After all, she's the one who started all this.

He went to see Gorushina in the early afternoon, calculating that nobody would be abroad during the heat of the day, and he was not mistaken. The streets were quiet and empty, even the open windows gave no glimpse or sound of anyone astir.

On reaching the cathedral wall, from which he could see the house and street in which Gorushina lived, he stopped to collect his thoughts and calm the beating of his heart. The heat had drained all his strength and he felt as if his head were filled with molten lead. It was so hot that everything seemed about to melt and flow over the land in murky streams.

A shaggy dog with burrs in its coat was lying in a narrow strip of shade, wriggling in the effort to get its whole body out of the sun, but either its head or its hind quarters remained exposed to it. Hungry flies circled above it, and the dog, too lazy to lift its head, snapped at their shadows darting across the dusty earth. Its right eye was covered with a film that looked like brass when the sun shone on it.

The little dark house in which Gorushina lived was out of line with the other houses, as if it had stepped forward in invitation, and its lop-sided sag was like a solicitous bow. Two of its shutters were off, the third hung crooked, and out of the moss-grown roof sprang a sooty chimney with many bricks missing. The dreariness of the house had a desolating effect on Kozhemyakin, his strength ebbed, his breath came in gasps, and his desire to speak to Gorushina vanished.

This is no time for such a thing, he said to himself reproachfully. A fine suitor, sweating and panting like this.

And I didn't sleep all night: I can imagine what my face must look like!

With a dull feeling of revulsion he stood watching the dog's brass eye and its paw striking out at the shadows of flies. From the direction of the river came the jarring cries of children at play.

Better come and see her in the evening; she's working now, and—and all that.

In a sudden fit of truculence he stamped his foot and shouted at the dog:

"Be off with you!"

The dog turned its good eye on him, flashed the brass one, showed its back, stretched and gave a yawn that ended in a squeak. Three peasants came in single file out of a side-street and walked into the square like wolves entering a glade in the forest. Ragged, pathetic, they stopped in the burning sun with their arms swinging limply to consult together in low voices, then slouched over to the cathedral wall, stirring up a cloud of dust with their bast sandals. Somewhere a sick child was crying. A gate slammed. A voice cried testily:

"Chase it away!"

Kozhemyakin looked at the peasants, sighed and walked slowly home, where he lay down for a nap, firmly resolved to go and see Gorushina that evening.

When he woke up the sun was setting, the orchard was aglow and he heard Shakir shouting angrily in the yard:

"What next? He's done nothing, brought no water. What does he think? He's got to work!"

"I thought so!" cried Kozhemyakin. Jumping up, he went over to the window and called the Tatar, glancing at himself in the looking-glass in passing to see whether he looked stern enough. He hardly recognized his puffy eyes; his right cheek was red and crumpled from sleep, his hair was dishevelled, and he looked altogether bedraggled.

A fine suitor! he said to himself in fretful despondency.

When Shakir came in he turned his back on him and said with a forced cough:

"Give Maxim notice."

"Ah," said the Tatar softly, obviously startled and regretful.

"You heard me!" muttered Kozhemyakin. He stole another glance into the looking-glass and, seeing the shamefaced smile on the Tatar's wrinkled face, was afraid he was about to plead for the yard porter.

"Go along, do as I say," he ordered in a voice as severe as he could make it, still with his back to Shakir. "I've had enough, what do I want with a loafer like him? Let him go today, this very minute. We've pampered him long enough. Be off with you."

Shakir went out noiselessly. His master sank into a chair in the middle of the room and began studying the toes of his bare feet while he said to himself:

He'll come to say good-bye to me. Shall I give him a lecture? He'll probably give me one instead, the insolent fellow!

"To hell with him!" came Maxim's voice from the yard.

That means me, of course, said Matvei to himself, lowering his head and listening. He knew he would recant if Shakir pleaded for the yard porter or if Maxim himself came and said:

"Why are you discharging me?"

It gave him satisfaction to hear an angry murmur coming now from the hall, now from the kitchen, now from the yard. Maxim was cursing, and while this was little comfort to Kozhemyakin the man, it was gratifying to Kozhemyakin the employer, and strengthened his decision to get rid of him.

Shakir came back. Closing the door firmly behind him, he cast furtive glances at the open window and said with a sigh:

"You owe Maxim eleven rubles twenty kopeks."

"Give him fifteen," said Kozhemyakin under his breath.

A change came over Shakir's long face, he held out his hand and opened his mouth.

"I know, I know," Kozhemyakin put in hastily. "I can guess what you want to say, and—"

The Tatar bent over, opened the door by pushing his back against it, and went out. Getting up, Kozhemyakin walked away from the window and stood staring down at the floor, resolutely driving all thoughts out of his head for fear of confronting the presentiment of misfortune that kept growing within him.

"Good-bye, friend," he heard someone say outside. "Thank you."

The gate banged and he heard—one, two, three—the diminishing sound of firm steps walking away over the hard earth.

... fifteen, sixteen, seventeen... he counted. Went away without so much as saying good-bye. Slunk away like a dog.

He wanted to feel outraged, he wanted to have thoughts that would justify what he had done, but his mind was torpid and full of alarm.

The orchard was wrapped in the gloom of a suffocating twilight. The dusty foliage hung without stirring. Something kept rustling in the thirsty grass and little stars, too tired to twinkle, pricked the dark sky. Someone knocked lightly at the convent gate and in the heavy silence a thin voice whimpered miserably:

"There's nowhere else for us to go, sister; we've tried everywhere—"

Should I go to her now? pondered Kozhemyakin, worn out with unspeakable boredom. It's late. And he's probably there. He's sure to be there.

All his thoughts were dual and contradictory. After dressing slowly, he went out of the gate, stood for a

moment gazing towards the town, then turned and walked out to the hot dark fields.

When he reached the ruins of the Mordovian settlement he saw something stir on one of the mounds. A match was struck and it burnt for a long time in the windless air, illuminating the hand holding it and the yellow disc of a face.

Kozhemyakin turned abruptly.

This place is frequented by all sorts of wretched creatures, he thought to himself.

Scarcely had he taken two steps in the other direction when he heard Senya Komarovsky call:

"Matvei Savelyevich! Is it you?"

"Yes."

"Come here. Sit down and talk to me."

Kozhemyakin was pleased to have met the hunchback, but after a moment's consideration he said:

"No, I won't join you. You come with me."

The hunchback approached jauntily, whistling to himself, scraping his feet on the ground and hunching his shoulders. He shook hands with Kozhemyakin and fell into step beside him, leaving the thin ribbon of his whistling trailing in the air behind them.

"So you've given Maxim the sack?" he said suddenly.

"Yes," said Kozhemyakin with a little start.

"I saw him," said the hunchback meditatively, crackling some paper in his pocket. "He was walking along with his nose in the air. He had a black box with all his worldly goods in it on one shoulder and a pair of new boots on his feet. Stamped along like a horse and said all kinds of nasty things about you."

"About me?"

"Yes."

"How do you feel about it?" asked Kozhemyakin after a pause. "I don't think you're particularly sorry for him, are you?"

"I don't feel sorry for anybody," said the hunchback too simply to be natural.

He's lying, said Kozhemyakin to himself.

"But do you realize you've lowered yourself in the eyes of your friends by sacking him?" asked the hunchback with a yawn like that of the dog with the brass eye.

Kozhemyakin winced.

"Why do you think so?" he asked irresolutely.

"They'll never forgive you."

"There's nothing to forgive. And I have no intention of asking forgiveness," said Matvei, piqued.

Komarovsky quickened his steps as if he had suddenly remembered someone was waiting for him, and Kozhemyakin said, as he tried to keep up:

"Is it my fault if he's lazy and neglects his work? I'm the master and I have a right to manage my own affairs."

"As a matter of fact, they manage you," observed his companion absently.

A big tree loomed up in the shadows as suddenly as if it had just sprung out of the earth. Komarovsky stopped under it.

"Shall we sit down?" he said.

"I don't mind," said Kozhemyakin.

The hunchback leaned against the trunk and rummaged in his pockets for a match, which he struck on his trousers and watched the flare while he said in an expressionless voice:

"If I were to say to you, 'Go and ask Maxim's pardon,' you'd probably say the same thing: 'I don't mind.'"

I wonder what he's driving at, thought Kozhemyakin, listening attentively.

"And if I were to say, 'Push his face in for him,' you'd also say, 'I don't mind.'"

"No, I wouldn't," said Kozhemyakin dully.

A moment later the hunchback said, without a trace of malice:

"You're not a bad man; you're worse than bad. A bad man makes you want to fight him, but the only thing you make a person feel is sorry. I'm sorry for you, but that's all. You're a Russian through and through. People like you ought to be driven into the wilderness for forty years. And her too."

"Avdotya Gavrilovna?" asked Kozhemyakin softly, leaning towards him.

"Yes. There's nothing you stand for, nothing you set any store by. It's hard to say why you were ever born."

The hunchback struck another match, held it up to Kozhemyakin's face and tossed it away before it went out.

"You don't smoke, only waste matches," observed Kozhemyakin for want of something better to say.

"I like striking matches in the dark," came the answer musingly out of the dark. "I strike them lying in bed at home and wherever else I happen to be."

"Why?"

"And they must be sulphur matches, Russian ones, not Swedish. Russian ones burn slowly, with different colours, and give off a vile smell."

Trying to be original, thought Kozhemyakin, glancing about him.

"Forty years in the wilderness," said the hunchback as if he were drunk.

In the distance stood the forest, encircling the fields with a dark and almost imperceptible wall. The land seemed to be squeezed into a tight little ball, but there was something comfortably familiar and deeply touching about the tightness and smallness of it.

"You're a disgruntled sort," complained Kozhemyakin. "Nothing pleases you."

"Nothing," agreed the hunchback.

The casual way he agreed made Kozhemyakin curious. He wanted to hear him enlarge on the subject—his words took on a pleasing significance in the darkness of the night.

He wanted to goad him into talking about people, about God, about everything, and, listening in awe, to forget about himself.

"You're very proud," he said. "Is that a good thing?"

"A very good thing," replied Komarovsky, who was sitting as still as if about to fall asleep.

Suddenly he said, with the unexpectedness of a blow: "Do you love her?"

Kozhemyakin started in surprise.

"Me? I—er—I like her."

"Hm," grunted Komarovsky impassively, but Kozhemyakin felt that his indifference was assumed, and he added by way of consolation:

"I should like to marry her—"

"You ought to get married," said Komarovsky. "It's the best thing you could possibly do."

"Well, Maxim has spoiled everything," said Kozhemyakin with a sigh.

"Forget Maxim. And Avdotya Gavrilovna, too. Both of them are out of your sphere entirely."

And he began to whistle a familiar tune. A hazy sickle of moon glistened over the forest, making it look blacker than ever.

Kozhemyakin felt an urge to wound the hunchback.

"And what about you?" he said. "Left in the lurch, eh?"

Komarovsky got up, slapped the dirt off his clothes with his long hands, and said with no trace of spite:

"You're rather stupid, Matvei Savelyevich—stupid and contemptible."

He stamped on the ground and walked off into the fields, still whistling to himself.

Kozhemyakin took off his cap and stood watching what bore little resemblance to a human figure disappear into the darkness. He strained his muscles and blew out his cheeks with the intention of shouting an insult after him,

but no words came to his lips and he was stopped by the intrusion of another thought:

I really am stupid. And, like Drozdov, everything I do is mere chance.

"Hey, Kozhemyakin!" came the hunchback's voice from the distance.

"Hullo!" Kozhemyakin called back.

"You aren't angry with me, are you?"

"Oh, no. After all, you didn't say it in front of anybody."

The invisible hunchback made a clucking sound as if he were laughing, then his voice rang out again:

"You ought to go away for a little while."

"Why?" said Kozhemyakin, but Komarovsky made no reply.

The crunching sound of feet walking over dry grass came across the fields. The sky brightened very slightly and the yellow stars faded as they cooled, but the earth remained as hot and parched as ever.

The priest's wife was right when she said the hunchback was a good soul, thought Kozhemyakin as he walked slowly back home. And he was right when he said I ought to go away for a bit. There's nothing I really want; after all, I didn't go and see her. I imagined I wanted her, but that was just because I was jealous of Maxim, the cur. But I really ought to get married. Perhaps I could find someone like her; someone who doesn't talk. Talk wears me out these days.

He reached home calm and reconciled to his fate, and in this spirit passed several days, unaware of the emptiness around him. But he was no longer used to emptiness; gradually it made him restless again and finally gave rise to alarm.

Why did the priest's wife have to start all this? he said to himself. She put me in the mood for marriage and then dropped me, so to speak. Blast her!

Shakir was moving quietly about the yard explaining to Foka, the new yard porter, where things were and what had to be done. Foka was a tall, round-shouldered peasant with a stony face framed in a thick beard bleached of all colour by the sun. His dark eyes rested on objects with an indifferent and immobile stare, and to everything the Tatar said he nodded his bald, peaked head without a word.

"Where do you come from?" Kozhemyakin had asked him on the day he hired him.

The peasant stared at the ground for some time before saying:

"It's all written down in my passport."

"Is there famine where you come from, too?"

"Yes."

"Well, live here in peace and perhaps you'll get your strength back."

"I'm peaceful enough," said the peasant, shifting from foot to foot and giving an unexpected blast through his nose, the nostrils of which were full of black hairs.

He was slow of movement, he picked things up hesitantly, and swayed from side to side when he walked, as if his legs were broken at the knee. On the whole he was a depressing creature.

While harnessing the horse to go and fetch water, he punched it in the face twice, and when the poor beast, spoilt by Maxim's gentleness, leapt aside with its ears back and eyes wide with fright, he lifted a long leg and kicked it in the belly.

Kozhemyakin had been watching from the window, and he called out:

"Hey, there! What are you doing? You mustn't do that!"

"If I mustn't, I won't," replied Foka, giving the horse's head an unnecessary twist as he pushed it between the shafts, at which the beast trembled and blinked, and large tears oozed out of its eyes.

"Stop it!" cried Kozhemyakin angrily. "She's not used to such treatment."

"She'll get used to it," said the peasant in a downright way.

"Why are you so rough?"

"To let her know."

"Know what? Know who? You?"

"Yes, me," said Foka as he buckled the harness. "I'm new."

"Teach her with gentleness."

"She's not a maid to be taught with gentleness," said the new porter, shrugging his shoulders and dilating his nostrils.

"You are a savage!" said Kozhemyakin with a sigh, aware of his defeat.

It's high time to be doing something about savages like him, thought Matvei, but the ones who ought to do something keep arguing over words and weighing ideas.

His attitude towards "those who ought to do something" grew increasingly antagonistic because they no longer came to see him. He brooded in his loneliness and became angry and resentful.

At last, feeling sufficiently equipped for a decisive talk, he put on his best clothes and on Sunday, after late mass, set out for the priest's house. He walked along briskly, feeling bold and shrewd, and knitted his brows to look impressive, thinking to himself:

I'll tell them about Foka: what do they think ought to be done with a fellow like that?

But on opening the unlatched gate he halted suddenly and his heart sank. Coming across the yard towards him was Maxim in a new blue shirt, looking as neat and trim as if he were going to his wedding. He glanced into Kozhemyakin's face, wavered, shrugged his shoulders and went back into the house, turning on Kozhemyakin his

broad back with the collar of his shirt cutting into his powerful neck.

He's even had a fancy haircut, noted Kozhemyakin indignantly, as he backed away and tried to close the gate behind him without a sound. But just at that moment Uncle Mark appeared on the verandah and called out in a jovial tone:

"Hullo! Come in!"

He approached and took Matvei by the arm and led him down the path.

"Have you heard how the famine has spread?" he said. "Thousands are dying."

Kozhemyakin sighed without answering. He had expected a different sort of greeting.

They went to the summer-house in the garden where the priest's wife was reading aloud from a newspaper which she held close to her face. Gorushina was sitting beside her and the priest, puffy and dishevelled, was half reclining in a big wicker armchair with his hands behind his head. All of them were mottled with sunlight.

"How do you do?" cried the priest in an unnaturally loud voice as he leaped to his feet. A blush spread over Gorushina's pale, tired face; she sat erect and said nothing, dropping her eyes as she held out her hand to the newcomer, and the priest's wife, laying down the paper on her lap, asked in a forced voice:

"How are you getting on?"

Everyone felt ill at ease. Kozhemyakin sat down, put his cap on his knee and cleared his throat.

"What heat!" exclaimed the priest apologetically. "Beastly, eh?"

"Yes," agreed Kozhemyakin.

"Avdotya," said the priest's wife, "please go and find out if dinner is ready."

"The thing is," said the priest, giving his uncle's sleeve

a tug, "the peasant wanders from place to place and is unable to—"

"Matvei Savelyevich," said his wife, "I want to have a word with you."

She went into the garden and the priest coughed and said imploringly:

"Don't be long, Anna, will you?"

Without bothering to answer him, she said to Kozhemyakin:

"Maxim is here."

"I saw him."

"It was wrong of you to do what you did."

He cast a sidelong glance at her and thought to himself: You're the one who started it all.

Feeling that some answer was expected of him he said the first thing that came into his head:

"Every employer has a right to dismiss his workers."

"Has he?" she drawled. "Without cause?"

"Maxim is lazy and too cheeky," said Kozhemyakin reluctantly. "Altogether he's no good."

"That's not true," the priest's wife almost screamed; then, lowering her voice, she began haranguing him in her usual precise diction as she led him down the path beside the fence.

"If you really believe in the things you were recently so enthusiastic about, you should have considered well before—"

Stalks of grass snapped against his boot-tops, gooseberry branches caught at his trousers, fennel gave off its heavy smell, and on the other side of the fence a hen cackled, drowning out the monotonous rattle of her words. Kozhemyakin was glad that the cackling prevented his hearing and understanding what she said. Judging by her tone, it was offensive. He walked just behind and to one side of her, gazing at the red, peeling skin of her sunburnt ear, thinking to himself as he puffed wearily along:

You ought to have been the priest.

"It's painful for me to see you in the wrong—"

Kozhemyakin stopped and said:

"How does Uncle Mark see it?"

She, too, stopped, and as she faced him and drew herself up, a ripple of wrinkles passed over her face.

"So my opinion is of no interest to you?" she said, reminding him of a wasp. With a shrug of her shoulders she turned away.

"I will send him here to you," she said.

Kozhemyakin looked about him. He was standing in a corner of the weed-choked garden; yellow colza and nettles and silvery wormwood had sprung up among the raspberry and gooseberry bushes and the sagging, yawning fence was covered with moss.

The bushes were caught in a veil of shadow as an opalescent cloud floated across the sun. There was a snapping of underbrush.

"Well," said Uncle Mark, giving his trousers a hitch as he approached Kozhemyakin, "let's have a talk."

Kozhemyakin took off his cap and glanced into the genial face that he knew so well. For some reason it bore a strange resemblance to the face of the priest's wife today: just as flat and uninteresting.

"This little storm must be stopped at the very outset," he heard him saying. "The lad's proud and has been injured unjustly. Put on your cap, the sun's blistering."

He blames me, thought Kozhemyakin, but he asked with hope:

"Are you angry with me?"

"That's not the word," said the old man, pulling at his cigarette. "The thing is, you mustn't buffet people about like that."

Once more Kozhemyakin was walking down the path beside the fence, this time with Uncle Mark, listening half-heartedly to his words, which, although soft and gentle,

made him want to fight back. Not so long ago such words had inspired and elevated him; today they droned on like bothersome flies in the autumn, circling round and round without touching his heart.

"The bastard!" he whispered suddenly.

"Who do you mean? Maxim?" asked Uncle Mark in a startled tone.

"Naturally. He's the one to blame. . . ."

"Hm," said the old man with a shake of his head. "Things are worse than I thought if that's how you feel. Dear me, and I thought you ... I was about to suggest that you apologize to him."

"To Maxim?" asked Kozhemyakin, scarcely believing his ears. He darted a sidelong glance at Uncle Mark, who, giving his beard a little flip, said softly:

"Then we could put everything right."

"What have I to apologize for?"

"Don't you really understand?"

"It's *I* who've been injured."

"And he?"

They said nothing for a moment. Then, with an uneasy look at Kozhemyakin, Uncle Mark said:

"Well, what's it to be?"

"I'm going home," said Kozhemyakin, looking away. "I'll have to think it over."

"That's it, my friend, think it over. Do. Otherwise we shall never be able to check the lad, and take my word for it, he's a fine lad. What a pity this had to happen!"

Kozhemyakin shook hands with Mark perfunctorily and went out of the garden holding high his head, which felt empty, yet strangely heavy.

In other words it's all the same to him: Maxim or me; he even thinks more of Maxim, he thought as he walked slowly down the street.

Out of a side street came a sow, grunting anxiously and disapprovingly; she stopped, sniffing the air and twitching

her ears, and five piglets drew round her. Jostling, jumping, squealing, they pushed their snouts against her mud-caked flanks and she snuffled the dust of the road, shook her bristly hide and blinked her little eyes as if at a loss where to seek refuge from such heat. Two yellow butterflies chased each other over her back and the drone of a wasp could be heard.

With a furtive glance round, Kozhemyakin went over to the sow and kicked her in the flank with all his might. The animal dashed away, squealing lustily; again he looked up and down the deserted street before he continued on his way.

He was thoroughly exhausted by the heat when he reached home. Taking off everything but his underclothes, he lay down on the floor. He felt ill, wronged, abandoned by everyone. Before his eyes in ever changing aspect passed the anxious face of Uncle Mark, which now seemed as alien to him as the face of the priest's wife.

So I'm to beg his pardon, am I? he kept muttering to himself, curling his lip disdainfully at the memory of Maxim's distrustful eyes, bent brows and close haircut that made the back of his head look like a butcher's.

The way they cater to him! he thought with indignation. He wants a woman, they give him one. He wants me to get down on my knees to him, they try to make me. For all their talk against the gentry, what are they doing but making a spoilt swell out of this peasant boy? Who is Maxim anyway? A dark horse. To this day nobody knows who made away with Vasya.

But he instantly dismissed this thought, which intruded itself cunningly at the moment when his antagonism to Maxim reached its height. All his other thoughts, explaining nothing, served only to augment his bitterness and resentment. Their weight pinned him to the floor, where he tossed and groaned.

Oh, God! Oh, God!

Again and again a tear formed in the corner of his eye. He would remove it with a finger, then, pursing his lips, hold it up to the light to contemplate it for a moment before wiping it on his shirt as if crushing an insect. The town was as silent as if it had dissolved in the heat. The only sound to be heard was the occasional shuffling of feet on the pavement: probably hunger-crazed, heat-drunk peasants begging alms.

Kozhemyakin dozed off and was visited by ghoulish visions. He saw Pelageya enter the room. Ragged, dishevelled, half-naked, she tiptoed over to him, shook a finger, and said enticingly, "Wait till dawn! Don't forget—till dawn!" With that she stepped over him and floated out of the window. Then he was transported to the fields, where he lay prone on the ground with a sharp pain in his chest, and through the gloom a black horse, limping on its left front leg, came leaping over the hills until it came so close that he could hear it neighing as if in pain; he struggled to get up and run away but was nailed to the ground by a stake driven through his chest. Just before the horse reached him he found himself in the bath-house, where kvass was flowing over the heated stones and giving off clouds of stifling steam. Seated on the floor next to him was a creature with sores all over his body and Drozdov's face, who kept pulling at his whiskers and saying in an unearthly voice:

"I implored you, I implored you, I implored you. . . ."

Suddenly the window burst open and thick grey clouds poured in like smoke, wreathed round him, picked him up, carried him out and dropped him into some thorn bushes, where he lay gasping and moaning while an invisible dog raced round and round the bushes, howling and barking. A smooth, eyeless face bent over him and long arms were stretched out to him; he felt them close round him and set him on his feet, and somebody pushed him from side to side.

It was Savka, who began to turn somersaults and roll over the ground, shouting:

"Hallelujah! Hallelujah!"

A crowd of dark and faceless people came running up crying, "Fire!" They cried in a single voice and threw themselves on to the ground, crushing the bushes under them, snatching at one another, clutching at Kozhemyakin's face and chest with hot hands, and at last they all ran off together so fast that it took his breath away. He screamed as he struggled to free himself from the grasp of the hunchback Komarovsky, and when he succeeded he fell down and struck his head, at which he woke up and found himself sitting bolt-upright gasping for breath, drenched in sweat and plastered all over with flies.

He got up, drank some kvass, and collapsed on the sofa as if drunk.

That's how I'll die: all alone, like a stray dog, he thought in horror as he lay staring at the ceiling.

Evening had come, bringing some relief from the heat, and he began going over in his mind all the bitter impressions of the day. This time, being more calm, he was less rigid, and admitted, albeit with difficulty, the possibility of a reconciliation.

If, now, I was to talk to him alone and say: "After all, you ought to understand, Maxim, that I'm your master and nearly twice your age, so—"

So what? asked an inner voice, and when no answer was forthcoming it repeated: So what?

If only everything was over! he exclaimed to himself, waving the flies off. His thoughts wandered erratically: It's the season for mushrooms, but there probably won't be any this year, what with the drought—

The gate latch clicked and light steps ran across the yard.

Could it be the priest's wife? he asked himself, jumping up, but at that moment Gorushina appeared in the doorway.

"Oh! Put some clothes on—"

She stood there flushed and panting, a kerchief hastily tied over her hair, one hand wiping her face, the other clenched on her bosom. She spoke quickly and incoherently, apparently asking for something. He started toward her with one hand to his collar, then jumped back, pulled on his coat and ran into the corner, muttering excitedly as he fumbled with his trousers, unable to get his legs in properly:

"Sorry—sorry—"

She lowered her voice almost to a whisper and bent her head, as if confessing her sins:

"Anna—the priest's wife, Anna Kirillovna—told him everything—that you called him a good-for-nothing and—and everything. He's furious—quite mad with rage—and he's coming here to have it out with you."

"Ah-h!" drawled Kozhemyakin. "Starting all over again? God in heaven!"

"I came to ask you—couldn't you go away for a while? Please, oh please do! Don't be angry—you're so good—it can't make any difference to you. Please, I beg you to—what good can come of your staying here? Just for a little while, until it all blows over—"

A kind-hearted soul, thought Kozhemyakin, touched by her agitation. Going over to her, he invited her in with an awkward gesture.

"Come and sit down," he said.

"I ran all the way—and it's so hot—"

She sat down and spread her kerchief on her knee.

"All of them but Father Alexander blame you, especially Komarovsky," she said more calmly, smoothing out her kerchief.

"The hunchback? A fine one, he is!" exclaimed Kozhemyakin in astonishment.

"But I don't blame you. I never argue with them, I don't know how to, but I disagree with them and he's angry and shouts at me. They keep talking about it and that just stirs him up; he's so proud and hot-headed. He doesn't believe

me. I tell him you're really a good person at heart and that makes him suspicious of me and he threatens all kinds of things and that's why I came running to tell you. Dear God, you can't even imagine how frightened I am! Never before has anything ever happened on my account and I don't *want* anything to happen! Oh, dear! It mustn't!"

She raised a round tear-stained face to him and whimpered:

"It's not my fault; I'm so afraid something will happen! Please go away "

"I will, I'll d it for your sake," murmured Kozhemyakin, quite overcome.

His fright and perplexity vanished, giving way to joy that was almost jubilation. He stroked her hair and touched her wet cheeks.

"Everything will come out all right," he said with growing optimism. Before he knew it he had put his arm round her and was saying:

"Let's go away together. He's no match for you."

But she slipped out of his embrace and held him off, saying firmly:

"What are you thinking of! I can't do that!"

"Why not?" he asked hotly. "We'll just slip away and nobody will even know."

"No, I can't," she said with a sigh.

"I mean—not just like that. I'll marry you."

She dropped her head, her fingers crumpled her wet kerchief and her body swayed from side to side as if she wanted to go away but could not wrench her feet off the floor. Without listening to what she was saying, he put his arms round her again.

"We'll go away in the night, and a fig for them!" he urged her excitedly. "All they do is argue and blame others, they are never really friendly towards one another, but you and I would live together in peace and quiet. Let's go, Avdotya, I'll be good to you and love you, really I will. I'm not a

young boy. You see me just as I am, the whole of me, all for you."

He put his hands on her shoulders, sure of his victory, but she suddenly made for the door.

"No, I cannot," she said clearly and simply. "I already belong to somebody else. You wouldn't want me now."

In the morning he himself realized this was so and did not even feel jealous of Maxim, but at this moment her words were like the lash of a whip. He staggered back and stuttered, choking with fury:

"Already? Oh, so you couldn't resist!"

Trembling and spluttering, he shook his fist at her and searched his mind for insults, but suddenly he heard her say very distinctly:

"He has bent me to his will. If you had come first—Ah, well! Good-bye, and may God bless you."

A new wave of hope surged up in him and threw a glow upon the woman, cleansing her as if with fire. He threw himself upon her, seized her hand and gazed into her eyes.

"Did he force you to it, Avdotya? If he did, if he forced you, it's of no account. After all, you're not a maid, you're a widow."

"No, no!" she cried in fright. Drawing herself up so that she seemed quite tall, she snatched her hand away and seized the handle of the door.

She said something else, but he did not hear her.

"Get out! Get out!" he bawled from where he stood in the middle of the room.

And she left. He threw off his coat. Before she had time to leave the house the gate banged again and she reappeared in the darkness, her little figure hunched up, waving her hand at him and shouting:

"Hide! He's coming!"

He let out a roar, pushed her aside, rushed into the hall, leaped down off the porch, hurled himself at Maxim, knocked him off his feet, fell on top of him and silently

pummelled his muscular body with his fists; dazed by a blow on the head, he staggered back, then rushed forward again with a yell and began kicking at a dark and formless mass writhing on the ground. He was aware of the shrieks of the women, Shakir's low wail, Foka's snorting and Maxim's grunts, which were like the barking of a dog. He danced and leaped to the accompaniment of these sounds, and he was filled with sweet exultation every time his foot struck resilient flesh.

The formless mass rolled over to the fence, broke in two, and half of it leaped up and plunged into the shadows, crying:

"I'll remember this!"

Instantly everything was quiet except for the wild beating of Kozhemyakin's heart, sending a weakness as of intoxication flowing through his limbs. He sat down on the steps to catch his breath, pulled his torn shirt about him, and pushed back the hair sticking to his wet forehead. Foka came crawling back over the ground grunting and spitting and moving his arms as if swimming. In the entranceway, Shakir and the deaf goitred cook were fussing about.

Presently Kozhemyakin was drinking cold kvass and Foka, sitting at his feet, was saying approvingly:

"Maxim's a good fighter."

"But he got it this time, didn't he?"

"Yes, he did. But it was me took your kicks, master."

"You?"

"That's all right. You've got a soft foot."

They could hear Shakir breathing heavily behind them and scratching his head.

"What did we beat him for?" asked Foka.

Kozhemyakin did not answer immediately, and after a little pause the Tatar said quietly:

"Better to ask first and fight after."

The peasant answered thoughtfully as he pulled crumbs out of his beard:

"Why should I? I just asked out of curiosity. Where's my pipe? I'll fetch a lantern."

With a sigh he added:

"You might offer me a drop for my efforts, master."

"Go inside and drink as much as you like," said Kozhemyakin listlessly.

Pale stars came out overhead. A glow flickered upon the dark horizon in the east: perhaps a village was burning. Through the silence came unrelated sounds, the ravings of the delirious town. A drunken voice, scarcely audible, wailed wearily:

"E-e-e-o-o-o-w!"

Foka came out into the yard with a lantern and wandered about, stooping over and holding the lantern up to his face as if lighting it for the earth to see.

Kozhemyakin rose to his feet. He fancied that all of them were expecting something: the sallow face of the cook, elongated by her goitre, gleamed in the window; Foka, who had put the lantern on the ground, hung suspended in a circle of light; Shakir was standing as motionless as if nailed to the ground.

He blames me, of course, thought Kozhemyakin, staggering away on shaky legs. Everybody will blame me now.

He recalled the apostolic head of Uncle Mark, his benign voice, his childlike eyes and the wrinkles scratched into his high forehead. And the eyebrowless face of the priest's wife, to which the glitter of her spectacles gave a glassy look.

Maxim will be the end of me, he warned himself as he stole like a thief into the house. On reaching his room he took his usual seat beside the window facing the orchard and plunged into thoughts of the morrow as into a dark sack. They led only to a blackness of incomprehension and an even greater desire to avoid people.

They drove me to it, he exclaimed, but he knew it was not true.

The next day the priest and Senya Komarovsky came to see him. The priest, black and dishevelled, jumped up and down and waved his arms; at first he seemed to be rating Kozhemyakin in a loud and furious whisper, but later his words became more intelligible and what he was saying startled Kozhemyakin and brought him to his feet.

"He struck her, do you hear? He's mad! Can't do anything with him!"

The hunchback, square and solid as a rock, stood with his hands in his pockets and said impassively:

"Only time can throw light on this muddle; meanwhile this is no place for you."

"That's it," broke in Kozhemyakin. "This is no place for me. I don't belong here. I never have belonged."

The hunchback went out and the priest darted about saying, one hand raised above his head:

"You are greatly at fault, greatly. Yet I feel for you. What dreadful tortures must a man have gone through to assault a fellow-creature! Oh, I do understand—that's how it was, wasn't it?"

"I lost control," murmured Kozhemyakin penitently.

He was willing to ask forgiveness of all of them, including Maxim. This unexpected solicitude for his welfare filled him with contrition and a longing to be forgiven, but the priest, ignoring his cries, tugged at his arm and whispered vehemently:

"The day will come when the judged and their judges shall both be brought to shame."

"I agree to any conditions," promised Kozhemyakin, but the priest drew him aside, saying mysteriously:

"We are beset by evil every day and on every hand, but the good comes to us at rare and unexpected moments and from unknown sources—"

"True," sobbed Kozhemyakin.

"Therefore our hearts must ever be ready to receive the good."

"Enough!" said the hunchback severely, tearing them apart.

"Write to me about what lies deepest in your heart; I shall await news of you with the utmost impatience," said the priest, embracing him and kissing him with hot, dry lips.

Shakir came in and said:

"The horse is waiting."

Kozhemyakin sat down and glanced about him: he saw the outlines of the trees beyond the window, as black against the grey sky as if carved out of darkness.

"You must hurry," said the hunchback in a loud, harsh voice.

Foka, with a dark and drunken leer on his face, came and stood in the doorway with his arms outstretched as though crucified.

"When will you come back?" asked Shakir with a sigh.

The priest pushed Kozhemyakin towards the door.

"Everything will come out all right," he said.

"Enough of your preaching, Father," cried the hunchback.

There followed some moments of hurry and bustle, of running about, pushing, muttering and getting in one another's way.

Kozhemyakin came to himself when his waggon, drawn by two post-horses, was already outside the town. They were climbing a hill and the horses had dropped into a walk. He raised himself and lifted the peak of his cap. In front of him the sun was setting, painting the birches a dazzling red-gold. He narrowed his eyes and glanced behind him: Okurov looked as gay and colourful as a young girl got up in all her finery; in receding, it hid behind the hills, which closed upon it like Savka's short thick fingers overgrown with fuzz, and in and out of them wound the Putanitsa, shimmering like quicksilver. Gradually the houses merged together, blending their colours and losing their contours. The green of the orchards took on tints of rose and silver and over them floated a blue haze. At last the town was

reduced to a multicoloured smudge, as if a strong and invisible hand had kneaded it like dough.

Kozhemyakin was longing to sleep, but first he wanted to discover some telling word that would sum everything up. He dug his chin into his chest, strained all his powers and squeezed out of his tired brain a single phrase full of resentment:

They've driven me out.

PART FOUR

Seven versts from Vorgorod, in a combe above the bright Oksha River, a rich monastery named after Elijah the Prophet had thrust its roots deep into the soil.

Through the green boughs and copper-coloured trunks of ancient pines could be glimpsed the broad white ribbon of its wall, reinforced at the four corners by towers. A fifth tower, broader and higher than the others, rose in the centre of the front wall over the entrance leading into the courtyard, where two chapels, a winter and a summer one, stood surrounded by smaller structures designed for more worldly purposes. Above the roofs of the hostel, storehouse and sheds, glittered the scaly gold onion-domes of the chapels, whose crosses, festooned with gold chains and lavishly ornamented, soared to the height of the pines. Higher up the hill-side was an enormous orchard, in the centre of which, among apple-, cherry-, plum- and pear-trees, in a sea of verdure of every tint, stood, like boats at anchor, the dark cells of the anchorites and, in a wide and sunny glade just within the far wall, a low house with three blue-shuttered windows where lived the saintly old man called the Venerable Ioan, renowned in those parts for the solace his words brought to the poor and the suffering.

Midsummer came and went, with no alleviation of the frightful heat of this year of drought. The church holiday of Elijah's Day brought over a thousand pilgrims to the

monastery, after which the dull monotony of monastery routine became even more evident. Tired and irritable monks crawled about in the sticky heat of the monastery grounds like flies on the window-pane, and an old goat with an imposing mien stood in the door of the stable shaking the beard the groom had solicitously combed and gazing with wise brown eyes at people ducking into the shade of the buildings. Novices were tidying the grounds after the influx of visitors and washing the floors of the spacious hostel. Through the windows they tossed their sweepings, crusts of bread, wads of greasy paper and pailsful of water that evaporated the instant it struck the hot stones.

The whole big hospitable institution was now engaged in restoring order. The monks moved languidly about their business, while on top of the hill a semicircle of people were standing in front of the Venerable Ioan's residence waiting for him to come out and speak words of comfort to them.

Among them was Kozhemyakin. For almost a month he had been living at the monastery, and every day at three o'clock he climbed the hill along a well-worn path whose hard surface was broken by the gnarled roots of pines and outcroppings of sandstone. He always snatched off his cap on coming in sight of the windows of the old man's cell, and on approaching the assembled people bowed low three times, convinced that he was the greatest sinner of them all. He sat down on one of the three benches near the porch or stood to one side under a pine-tree, waiting reverently for the old man to come out and speak the simple words that filled the heart with peace and resignation.

The Venerable Ioan emerged from his cell at precisely half past three. Of average height, erect as a soldier and lean as a rook, he held out a long white hand in benediction while a blue-eyed novice with fluffy hair placed a low leather armchair behind him. Without glancing round he sank into it, lifted his fingers to his sparse beard that looked

like pure silver but for the few remaining black hairs in it, and raised his head and his heavy dark eyebrows.

Then only could one see his pale but piercing eyes. The face of the old man—calm and noble and as if carved of cyprus wood—bore a striking resemblance to the candid and benevolent faces depicted on the icons of the new French school.

As he gazed intently at the people bowing before him, his eyes narrowed and darkened and his face assumed a hard, stern expression. But the next moment there was a play of wrinkles on either side of his delicate nostrils and thin lips, the cold gleam of his eyes melted into a soft and reassuring smile, and from under his grey moustache issued a voice that was strong, clear and authoritative:

"I greet you, my brothers, in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost."

The people bowed and fell on their knees murmuring: "Mediator! Intercessor! Blessed Father!"

The old man sat erect and motionless with his fine hands on his knees, against a background of potted plants: roses, geraniums, hydrangeas and many other bright flowers imbedded in luscious green. His dark form was like an icon in a rich frame: the flowers were as brilliant as the jewels of an icon frame and the curly-haired, red-cheeked novice resembled an angel.

When the whimpering suppliants crawled to the porch to touch the robes and feet of the old man with trembling fingers and to kiss them with out-thrust lips, he shrank back and drew his feet under his chair, and the frowning novice waved the people away. They scrambled back helter-skelter, and in their impatience to hear the old man's words of comfort they became irascible and sharp with one another.

"I would speak to you alone, Father," implored one voice anxiously, and this was echoed by others, some soft, others loud; some timid, others importunate:

"Me too—me—me—"

Sometimes, after looking long at one of the suppliants, the old man would say:

"Stand aside and I will hear you."

But usually he said in an even but implacable tone:

"I cannot, it is impossible. You can see for yourselves how many there are of you. I have no time to speak to each one separately. What do you wish to say? What is in your heart?"

Their lament was the old one that Kozhemyakin had heard only too often, and that weighed like a stone on his own heart.

"I have no peace, I am the most miserable of men and there seems to be no way out. . . ."

Then through the sweet scent of the pines and of ripening apples came the mild, reassuring voice:

"Nowhere can we find peace and comfort but in the lap of God. We must live simply, having faith in God's goodness; we must live like little children, which means living as God would have us live. Our Saviour was a child at heart and he loved little children and said of them: 'Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.' "

Peace emanated from the pines, standing straight as candles, their trunks decked with the gold and amber of hardened resin, their boughs shedding the blessing of sweet shade upon the earth, their crowns blazing like emerald flames in the sunlight. Through the billowing green foliage gleamed the gold of the chapel domes, the silver of the river and the yellow of the sand. Apple- and pear-trees, lavishly hung with fruit, stepped in solemn procession down the hill-side, and everything was wrapped in the sweet tranquillity of a beautiful dream.

As Kozhemyakin gazed into the faces of these people, furrowed by painful thinking and blunted by suffering, he saw eyes that were dull and listless with despair and eyes that burned with a mad light, he saw lips that trembled, cheeks that twitched, movements that were false and uncer-

tain, smiles that were strange and unaccountable, tears that were inarticulate. At times he seemed to be contemplating one great body torn by grief and jerking convulsively on the ground. One great tortured soul. And as he looked he thought to himself:

These are to be as little children? *These* take children as their model? Why, they are the very ones who beat children, beat them cruelly.

But the old man went on comforting his flock with a quiet smile on his face:

"The Lord has exhorted us to endure the sufferings of this world. Remember how he prayed at Gethsemane? 'Father, let this cup pass from me.' It was hard for Him, harder than for us, yet He submitted to His Father's will for the sake of our salvation. This life has been given us as a test and a trial. Was it to oppose our Creator we were born, or to violate His laws and set our own above them? Cast out of your hearts the proud desire born of the devil to take vengeance on those who hate and abuse you, for it has been said: 'Blessed are the meek.' Garb yourselves in robes of endurance, tame the wildness of your nature and enjoy the peace of God that passeth all understanding. Resistance to evil creates but more evil."

He always spoke about the same things: patience, humility and love, and always ended his talk at the same time—exactly at half past four.

Here's a man who has faith, thought Kozhemyakin as he gazed upon the fine, austere features of the Venerable Ioan.

The old man looked down upon the multitude from a great height, and they floundered at his feet like fish thrown on to dry sand, opening and shutting their mouths and waving their arms frantically. Their plaints were uttered sullenly, hesitantly, dejectedly, noisily, diffusely. Each of these people was different. They had been disunited by manifold suffering, and the suffering of each made him deaf and blind to everything except his own suffering. And upon

these people, convulsed by every sort of ailment, the placid words of the old man fell like soothing drops of summer rain:

"Be like little children."

He does have faith, thought Kozhemyakin. But with growing clarity he realized that these people could never be like little children and that they could never live except as they were living. There was no peace within them, and there was no strength in their torn and broken hearts to draw on. He observed them not only here, in the presence of the old man, but in the hostel down below as well, and he knew that each had a fire smouldering in him that would go on smouldering to the end of his days, or until, by eating into his very vitals, it consumed him.

Yet the more convinced he became of this, the more struck he was by the calm insistence with which the old man said to these people who thirsted for peace and quiet:

"Endure!"

His audience listened eagerly, and upon their faces, together with the shadows of evening, fell the shadows of tranquillity. Their forms seemed to become smoother, heavier and more relaxed, as if immersed in a waking dream.

More than once Kozhemyakin had said to himself:

I'll ask him to give me an audience and I'll bare my soul to him.

And, with the anticipation of this in his heart, he had gone back down the hill.

In his room in the hostel he was visited almost daily by Father Zakharia, a fat jovial monk with sore eyes and swollen lids concealed by dark spectacles. After crossing himself, Father Zakharia would sit down at the table with the samovar standing on it and say the same thing day after day:

"Come and live with us, pious Christian, eh? It's quiet here and you could devote all your time to praying for this miserable world. Why should you go on living all by yourself, eh? You have reached an age when you ought to

be thinking of yourself. And your health is none too good, they say."

Perhaps he's right, thought Kozhemyakin. And he had a pleasant picture of himself, a devout old greybeard, filled with peace and love for mankind, sitting like the Venerable Ioan in an armchair before the people, bringing them comfort by speaking words drawn out of the depths of his soul. A mildly reproachful thought crept into his mind, but it did not disturb him particularly:

And so am I to withdraw from my fellow-men *like everybody else?*

Occasionally the bearded face of Uncle Mark would rise up before him, but the vision became more and more remote and blurred and receded into the painful past.

I would be sure to find peace here; especially if I made them a generous donation.

But one day during his visit to the Venerable Ioan his gaze was arrested by the one dark eye of Tiunov, his Okurov acquaintance, who was standing among the crowd. He was leaning against the trunk of a pine with his hands behind his back, his head on one side, his blue lips moving as he stared intently at the holy man. Kozhemyakin turned away, but not before Tiunov had noticed him and given him a friendly nod.

He's seen me, thought Kozhemyakin in vexation.

A little later he heard Tiunov saying:

"Father Ioan! There are doubts in my mind on a certain question: quite recently the court sentenced the *skoptsy* to exile in Siberia, but in Holy Writ it says: 'Judge not the *skoptsy*, for they mutilate themselves that they may attain the Kingdom of Heaven.' Be so good as to explain this to a thickhead like me. They seek to go to heaven and they are sent to Siberia."

The novice lifted his eyebrows and gestured Tiunov to be silent, but the old man narrowed his eyes and said impressively:

"You again? I explained to you once, my good man, that I come here not to engage in futile disputation, but to bring comfort to the hearts of those oppressed by the cares of this life. As I am not a judge, the passing of judgement is not within my sphere."

The people glared at Tiunov and muttered under their breath, the novice bent over to whisper something in the old man's ear, covering his shoulder with his thick brown curls. The old man shook his head.

They won't give him a chance to speak, thought Kozhemyakin with relief.

But Tiunov remained standing to one side, twisting his beard round his finger and gazing intently at the old man, who was now speaking in a raised voice:

"We suffer not because God fails to hear our prayers, but because we disregard His commandments and instead of seeking peace in pious living and surrendering ourselves to the will of God, we question His laws and set ourselves against them. . . ."

"Quite right, Father," said Tiunov in a loud voice. "We rush hither and thither like sheep looking for a shepherd and unable to find one."

"The Lord is our shepherd, and none but He."

I don't want to listen to this, resolved Kozhemyakin, and, making his way through the crowd, he set off down the path winding between apple-trees and hazel bushes. As he was passing through the gate leading from the orchard into the courtyard of the hostel he heard Tiunov greet him in respectful terms and felt his questions scratching at him like playful claws:

"Good-day to you, Matvei Savelyevich. Have you been long in this holy seat? Are all our friends in Okurov well and happy? Do you remember Semyon Drozdov?"

The last question went home.

"Where is he now?" asked Kozhemyakin.

"Here in Vorgorod, in town."

And in a bantering yet inoffensive tone he told him that Drozdov had settled down with the owner of a bakery shop, a widow some five years his senior, who had taken him unto herself as well as into her business, and he was now enjoying all the blessings of this life—food, clothes and even drink on holidays—but he was never allowed out of range of the widow's watchful eye.

"She trusts him no more than a little child, for as you know he's a man of imagination and the widow's a sharp one: there are even rumours she served as virgin to the *khlysty** sect for a time and that's where she got her money. Semyon has learned to play the guitar and developed a passion for poetry."

"So he's settled down, has he?" mused Kozhemyakin.

"So it appears. Well, no harm done by *his* being prosperous. He's not a greedy man."

"Is greed harmful?"

"Not as harmful as stupidity, of course. Clever greed doesn't hurt the cause."

"What cause?"

"Oh, any cause. In general, so to speak."

Kozhemyakin was thirsty, but he could not make up his mind to invite Tiunov in, nor could he say good-bye to him. Before he knew it he was walking beside him down a paved road through a copse leading to the monastery's landing place on the river. Tiunov told him all sorts of interesting things in various voices, as if he were playing many parts in a play: now he spoke pensively, sprinkling his words with sighs; now brightly, stressing certain words by soaring to a flippant tenor, then suddenly dropping to a deep, crooning bass. And in all that he said could be detected, even though disguised, a shade of irony that whetted the listener's interest.

"Did you recognize the Venerable Ioan?"

* A religious sect.–*Tr.*

"No. Who is he?"

"Comes from Okurov."

"Okurov?" repeated Kozhemyakin in consternation sure that Tiunov must be mistaken.

"That's right. Never heard of him? Ippolit Voyevodin."

"Not really!"

"I remember him as an officer. A very fine soldier he was. And now look what he's become!"

They walked along the street of the clean and prosperous monastery settlement, past cheerful little houses nestling behind front gardens. The background of green woods made it seem as if the houses had stepped out from under a green canopy for a friendly stroll along the river-bank. Kozhemyakin and Tiunov encountered well-dressed, well-fed settlement folk, the women big and red-cheeked, the children too quiet and grave for their age.

"What made him enter a monastery?" asked Kozhemyakin somewhat reluctantly.

"Don't know. Hunger, I suppose," said Tiunov, who kept lifting his cap and exposing a skull the shape of a melon. "These days there are only two paths open to a high-born gentleman: either he enters a monastery or he takes to gambling—becomes a card-sharper."

"Can't he become a government official?"

"Oh, there's that of course. That's like soldiering, open to anybody."

"So is entering a monastery."

"But not everybody can climb high in that field."

"How high?"

"To preaching sermons. They always manage to push the gentry into those high posts—Venerables and the like who preach sermons—because they'll never spill the beans."

"What sort of beans?"

"All sorts. The secret workings and such," said Tiunov evasively, strutting along with the importance of a turkey-

cock, his head thrown back and his pointed beard sticking out like a weapon.

His words dispelled the sense of quiet resignation inspired by the monastery atmosphere.

"Mark this: all the saints in Russia have been dukes or counts or something; no saints ever came from the merchants or artisans or peasants—unless, perhaps, among the Old Faith, but they don't count."

"Mm," said Kozhemyakin vaguely. "True, according to *The Lives of the Saints*, quite a few of the nobles became holy men."

"In general the gentry seem to be the first to reach God. But I wonder how it would look if the *Lives* had been written by a peasant, eh?"

Tiunov narrowed his one eye and chuckled, and Matvei Savelyevich, too, could not help laughing as he said:

"But the peasants couldn't have written it, they're illiterate."

"True, true!" cried Tiunov, coming to a standstill and lowering his voice.

"We Russians are on the wrong track. It's not on the getting of silver and gold we want to spend our energies, but on learning. A man's got to have an awful lot of silver and gold if he's to be able to hang on to it and to wield power through it. But nobody can take a man's learning away from him; it goes deep down into his very marrow."

If I had as much learning as they, wouldn't I tell them a thing or two! was the thought that flared up in Kozhemyakin's mind and as suddenly died down, to be followed by fleeting memories of the recent experiences that had left him feeling so bitter towards the world.

"Every chap who comes along thinks he has a right to judge us," he muttered with a frown, "and we don't know how to defend ourselves."

"We're bells without clappers: we only ring when somebody gives us a bang on the outside," said Tiunov.

"That's true."

"Plain as the nose on your face. Do you call this living—each of us crouching in a hole in the ground for fear of being spied by those in power? But if it's said 'One man in the field is no warrior,' then what sort of a warrior is one man in a hole in the ground?"

"Let's go and have a glass of tea," said Kozhemyakin impulsively, taking Tiunov's arm.

He felt as though he were emerging from a dark cloud into the light, as though he were throwing off the heavy cloak in which his soul as well as his body had been enveloped. Aware of the revolt taking place within him, he walked firmly up the steps of the tavern, strode through the bright tap-room and took a chair at a table on the balcony, flinging his coat wide open.

"Sit down," he said.

"Very nice here," said Tiunov, rubbing his hands together and casting his eye over everyone and everything as he took a seat opposite Kozhemyakin. Matvei Savelyevich also looked round him and even over the railing into the street below.

"What's your opinion of the old man?" he asked quietly and confidentially.

"Oh, he's a wicked one, very wicked," said Tiunov, lifting a finger for emphasis.

A mirthless smile passed over his mutilated face and vanished in the red scar where his right eye had been.

"I've crossed swords with him at least five times," he went on softly, winking at Kozhemyakin. "Once they even had to carry me down the hill, I got so out of hand. A very wicked old man, he is!"

"Wicked?" Kozhemyakin repeated the word with the mixture of pleasure and pain one feels on having a splinter pulled out.

"Just that: wicked," whispered Tiunov, and a green glint came into his eye. "Listen to what I've got to say; it's not

something I've thought of on the spur of the moment, it's what's been hammered into me during long years of hard experience."

Leaning over with his chest on the table and his one eye riveted on his companion's face, he spoke in a low intense voice:

"Who are we? A people worn out by a hard life: afraid, naked, orphaned, with not so much as a toothpick to defend ourselves with. We've forgotten we're all kin and we've lost hope in the future, so we just go on living without a spark of life, day after day, from hand to mouth, taking what comes. It's a dog's life, a very hell of a life, but there's no denying we're a lazy lot. Do you agree?"

"I do," said Kozhemyakin.

"There, now, you see?" cried Tiunov. "But we're not only lazy, we're clever, too," he added in an exultant whisper. "We're quick to catch on to things, we've got our wits about us; we're even wise in our own way."

"The old man too?" asked Matvei Savelyevich.

"We'll come to him later. First, the people. What are their brains like? Grey and mushy, if the truth's to be told. Thinking comes hard to them and they don't trouble themselves to find new ways of doing things. 'Grandpa had his plough and his sow; Grandson's got them now.' The peasants have plenty of brawn, but very little brain, and they've no respect for brain. They look on it as the property of the gentlefolk, and what good ever came from the gentlefolk? So where are the poor beggars to turn for consolation? To the bottle—and to Ippolit Voyevodin. Plain as the nose on your face. Well, once I went to the Venerable and said: 'Father,' I said, 'I don't know what sort of life I ought to lead.' 'Why should you?' says he. 'That's not required of you. What's required is that you make yourself ready to die. No matter how a man lives on this earth, he'll die in the end; the main thing is heaven, the Kingdom of God.' See now why he's so wicked? Could the Kingdom of God

be for lazy loafers? It could not! But fellows like him help to multiply the loafers, of which there are plenty without their help. What are his words of comfort? Be patient, bow down to the will of God, don't resist evil, don't put down roots in this life, for the Kingdom of God is not of this world, and God is not to be found in the forces that are breaking you, but in truth. Well, then, what is truth? Truth's a force, and it's got to be found, and it's got to be taken in hand like a club to defend ourselves with against all the evils of this life. It's in the force of reason that God's to be found, and reason is truth. That's the trinity for you: reason, truth and the strength of God that comes from them."

His face was flushed and the scar on it glowed like a hot coal; the ardour with which he spoke had reduced his voice to a hoarse whisper.

"What did the Lord say? Here's the earth, labour upon it in the sweat of the brow and turn it into a paradise. And when Christ said, 'My kingdom is not of this world,' he didn't mean the world in general, he meant the Roman and Jewish world. This is what he meant: The whole world's my pie, not just this little piece the Jews and Romans have cut out of it. In other words, the Kingdom of God is here on this earth: get busy, folk, and God will stand by you! Words of comfort like those the old man speaks only make us lazier than ever. To hell with them! No more words of comfort, thank you! Nothing but the truth! A man's down in the mouth? Get to work! No strength? Find the strength. Can't? Then good-bye. Short and snappy. Treat him like a soldier: right about face and forward march! There you are!"

This was not to Kozhemyakin's taste. He turned away and muttered:

"Isn't that being a bit hard-hearted?"

"Why be soft-hearted?"

Tiunov's grimy face twitched, his toothless mouth stretched in a grin and his one eye blinked.

"I've listened to dozens of prophets like him in all sorts of places, from one end of the land to the other," he went on, raising his voice and pulling down the corners of his mouth. "And I tell you plain: what they say is worse than the bottle; it's pure poison for folk like ours who are sunk in hopelessness. Our folk have got to be taught to fight their ills and not go on bearing them. They've got to be taught to love work and to be up and doing."

Just what Mark Vasilyevich said, thought Kozhemyakin. There must be some truth in it if people from such different walks of life—

As he listened he gazed out over the roofs at the quiet flow of the river. On the far bank grew pines and birches that marched away to form a dense wood in the distance. As he gazed at their reflection in the water he fancied they had emerged from its depths and were moving slowly and imperceptibly off to the ends of the earth. In the open spaces stood haystacks with peasants in blue and red blouses moving among them, tossing hay into carts. On the tips of the trees mirrored in the water a boat was perched motionless, two fishing-poles sticking out of its bow suggesting the feelers of an enormous beetle. A big black ferry-boat was being propelled by two black monks with a third at the rudder. It left rippling paths that spread like wings in its wake, shaking the reflections in the water to life and creating the impression that they were scurrying to the green banks for shelter.

He'd like to finish off the old man, thought Kozhemyakin, amazed by the indifference with which he listened to the inflammatory words of Tiunov, who kept on pounding out his message:

"Every person ought to have something he's set his heart on. What's life without something you've set your heart on? Take you, for instance. . . ."

"Me?" asked Kozhemyakin, startled.

"Not you personally, but merchants in general. You as a class."

"Well?"

"And what a class!"

"You mean . . .?"

"A real force."

"Oh, a force, you say?"

"Yes, indeed," said Tiunov. "Where are the gentry these days? What do they busy themselves with? Nothing but law courts and trials. So it's only right that your class has outstripped them. Isn't it the merchants who're building churches, hospitals, charity institutions and railways? Isn't it the merchants who're tearing up and digging into the whole country in search of anything that can be put to good use? Isn't it, I ask you?"

Kozhemyakin nodded, and Tiunov, frowning and screwing up his face in a fierce grimace, almost shouted at him:

"But they haven't come round to the main thing. What is it they need if they really want to be on top? Learning! Knowledge! It's not hospitals they ought to be building, but schools, so that all the people can learn to be of some real use and know the worth of their native land. Plain as the nose on your face. Who but the merchant can come to the help of the common folk? The only value a man has for most people is that he can be robbed, but a merchant looks at him in a different way. A merchant needs a man who'll do a good job for him, because the merchant's a practical fellow. So it's up to the merchant to give the common folk an education that'll teach them to know their own worth and the worth of their country. Raise up a man to the heights of reason so that he can look about and choose a job he likes; don't just shove him into the first hole whether he fits it or not; he may be no good, but he's a living creature and it hurts him to be shoved about like that."

"The word 'merchant' has become almost a curse for some people," observed Kozhemyakin, remembering Galatskaya.

"And why?" cried Tiunov. "Why should people scorn strength? It's all their doing, those Ippolit Voyevodins; all theirs, I tell you! It's a simple matter to steel the shirt off the back of the meek. Enough of it! It's high time we put an end to their pious drivel! All of us are used to tearing the shirts off each other's backs, and the skin too, but it doesn't get us anywhere; we just go dancing around in circles with our hands at each other's throats. And instead of feeding on the fruits of the land, we drink each other's blood, and poor blood it is, poisoned with vodka. What we've got to do is to dress a man in clothes worthy of a human being, put tools and weapons in his hand, give him everything in our power, and for everything we give him he'll pay us back a hundredfold. A sensible man always pays his debts; it's only a fool who dreams of stealing a hundred rubles and running away."

"It's true what you say," said Kozhemyakin, infected by his enthusiasm.

"This head's done some pretty hard thinking," said Tiunov, tapping his forehead boastfully. "When I look about me I can't help marvelling at the riches on every hand. Yea, yea! What's lacking in this country of ours? Nothing except reason. It's enough to make a man weep to see what's going on: the land furrowed by gullies, the rivers blocked by sand, the forests burning to the ground, the villages too, the cattle shrunk to the size of lice, the peasants living like savages: hungry, dirty, ignorant, ferocious. And nobody cares. They might care and try to better their lot, but there's no hope of it—it's against the law. We live like captives and there's no one to teach us how to live better. All the government cares about is taxes: pay your fare, that's all we care."

He closed his glowing eye and a big tear rolled from under the lashes. Kozhemyakin was deeply touched; he remembered the finely chiselled face of the Venerable Ioan and thought:

He would never cry. But Mark Vasilyevich did.

"Begging your pardon," said Tiunov softly, averting his face. "It sort of opened up old wounds."

Kozhemyakin sighed and turned away without a word. An evening breeze came down from the hills, the bell rang for vespers and the sound floated across the river out to the blue woods, where the tips of the pines were already flaming in the sunset.

He'll go away, thought Kozhemyakin, and I'll be left alone again with my thoughts. Father Zakharia will go on pestering me to become a monk and before you know it I'll give in just to get rid of him. There's no denying what the old man is. "Be patient," he says, but why should we be? Tiunov has a bold way of speaking, and yet—hm, he seems to be trying to get into my good graces.

Tiunov pushed back his unfinished glass of tea.

"Going to vespers?" he asked.

"No, I'm not in the mood," said Matvei dreamily.

"Neither am I."

Tiunov gazed at the sky, at the river and at Kozhemyakin without seeming to see them, then, after a pause, he screwed up his eye and said:

"How would you like to spend the night with some fishermen three versts up the river? Fine chowder they make."

"I wouldn't mind," agreed Kozhemyakin. "To tell you the truth, I'm sorry to part company with you."

"And I with you."

Unhurriedly they went out into the street, which was now tinted with the glow of the setting sun.

The more Kozhemyakin talked to Tiunov, the better he liked him. He did not feel inferior in his company, he felt his equal. He still did not trust him, but his distrust was eclipsed by his interest in what Tiunov had to say. He recalled his first impression of the man:

He speaks softly but it's as if he were shouting at the top of his voice.

They walked down to the river, or rather slid down with the sand. At one side of the landing place a curly grey head could be seen above the gunwales of a blue boat.

"Hey! Nazarych!"

"Hullo! So you've come?"

A massive, broad-shouldered red-faced old man stood up in the boat. He rowed it to the shore and when the bow bit into the sand he said in a deep, friendly voice:

"Get in."

"A fine specimen, eh?" said Tiunov to Kozhemyakin, winking towards the boatman.

"Not bad," said Kozhemyakin as he seated himself, and at the same time the thought flashed through his mind: They might take me off somewhere and cut my throat.

The old man had fawn-like eyes that smiled at them as he rowed.

"Not bad—that's what the women say about me," he chuckled.

"You're a great sinner, Nazarych," said Tiunov genially. "Even the tsar's a sinner in the eyes of God."

Nazarych sat erect, without bending as he rowed, using only his arms, which he worked slowly and noiselessly, so that the only sound to be heard was the click of the rowlocks and the rush of the water as the bow cleaved it, making it ripple away, disturbing the dark reflections of the buildings along the shore. Kozhemyakin felt awed in the presence of this old man. They were moving against the current, and Matvei fancied they were descending into a dark pit in little jerks. Tiunov's flat voice, edged with the metal of his irony, droned on in harmony with the quiet lapping of the water.

"Look at him! A man of rare beauty and inexhaustible strength! He carries sixty-seven years on his shoulders as if they were twenty, and he'll carry a hundred yet, you may be sure. And there's nothing he's denied himself in this life, is there, Nazarych?"

"I'm afraid not. Why should I? If God gave me such strength, He must have meant me to use it."

"You've used it all right, but to no good purpose. You've never cared what sort of name you left behind you. If you'd wanted to, you could have done great things; brought blessings to the people and made yourself rich."

Giving himself up to the motion of the boat, Kozhemyakin sat staring at Tiunov's peaked skull and his weather-beaten one-eyed face and thought:

There's no satisfying him. Always talking about money. Must be greedy.

Aloud he said:

"What good are riches?"

"No good," affirmed the fisherman. "Christ Himself was a poor fisherman and so were His disciples."

"Oh, no; if a man doesn't bury his soul in money, if he uses it sensibly, it will do him credit and bring benefit to others. We're very much in need of riches. Our land's rich, but there's no one to work it and so everybody lives in poverty."

"Here we are," said the old man, running the boat up hard on to the sandy beach. Jumping out, he lifted the prow and dragged the boat with ease over the wet sand, then he straightened himself and called out in a strong authoritative voice:

"Nikolai!"

With big steps he strode over to a dug-out built into the side of a hill. In front of it burned a fire which shed light on the black hole of the entrance. Behind the tall figure of the fisherman two shadows came across the sand: the one behind was made black and short by the fire-light, the one in front long and pale by the moonlight. Beside the fire stood a thin delicate-looking boy in his teens with round eyes in a face as grave as a monk's.

"He's not all there," said Tiunov. "His wits were scared out of him. A fire. His mother and sister were burnt to

death and he went off his chump. He lived in a monastery for a bit but they turned him out—thought it wasn't quite the place for him. If he'd been older you can be sure they'd have made a saint of him."

Tiunov laughed softly.

A moon of hammered copper hung in a blue sky, on the other side of the river the forest came down to the water's edge and the tips of the pines were like the teeth of an enormous saw; the steep hill behind the dug-out was overgrown with thick bushes giving it a blurred, mysterious appearance, and everything round about looked blurred and mysterious, as in a fairy-tale. The river had a dull gleam, and instead of flowing, it seemed to be heaving up and down without moving ahead. The fire flared up to embrace the black pot hanging over it, and shadows danced on the sand like wounded birds in the convulsions of death.

"Yes, you've wasted your life," insisted Tiunov jocularly.

"What of it?" replied Nazarych, on whose massive form the fire threw a flickering red light.

Kozhemyakin lay down on a bast mat near the dug-out.

There seems to be no escape from such talk, he thought.

The crackling of the flames and the talk of the two men sitting beside the fire came to his ears.

"The Lord told us to serve the people and not hide our light under a bushel."

"Then why do holy men go off to live alone in deserts and forests?" asked the old man lazily.

"Wait. . . ."

"But there aren't many holy men left nowadays. The people are growing tougher and nastier every day."

"They need to be taught to use their heads."

"They've split up into different sorts. There used to be just peasants and monks and gentlefolk, that's all."

"And what about merchants and soldiers?"

"They were all just peasants. But nowadays there are all sorts: officials, lawyers, teachers, river police and all the

rest. The gentry have got pushed out of the picture and there's no telling why."

Kozhemyakin was seized with despair.

No, he said to himself, there's no escaping such talk.

He shut his ears to it by calling to mind a comic but dreadful story he had recently heard. One night, while lying in bed in the little blue room of the monastery hostel, he had heard someone in the next room saying:

"Grisha was thirty-six when his father sent him to St. Petersburg to sell a load of pork fat. Thinking to fool his father, he sent him a message saying nobody would buy the fat. As soon as the old man got the message he took a brass basin, set it on the floor in the hall, got down on his knees beside it, hung his head over it, and cut his throat. He died on the spot."

"Ts-ts!"

"Yes, he did."

"What was the basin for?"

"To keep the blood off the floor. You can't wash blood off the floor, you've got to scrape it off and he thought too much of the floor for that."

"A thrifty old fellow!"

"Well, the message was false, of course. Grisha got a good price for the fat, came home, and lived as he pleased. Married a poor girl, locked her up in the house and roamed the countryside like a wolf in search of prey. He went to the Bashkirs and bartered tea, sugar and vodka for land. Money came pouring in rivers into his hands. Thirty years passed—"

"Thirty?"

"Can't say exactly, may have been even more. Grisha's son grew up—he's that Vasya we just met—and history repeated itself. Grisha sent Vasya to sell sheep hides at the fair at St. Makaria and Vasya sent him the same sort of message. Thought his father would commit suicide like his grandfather had done. But not Grisha! He sends back his

answer: 'Sell them for whatever you can get and come home.' Well, Vasya sells them and comes home, and Grisha meets him on the same spot where his old man had cut his throat and bangs him over the head with an iron poker so hard that Vasya's been soft ever since."

The voice broke off for a moment and a monk could be heard railing at a stable-boy in the yard:

"You feeble-minded son of a bitch!"

A hoarse voice asked:

"What did he die of—Grisha?"

"Probably of old age. And bad food, too. He used to go to the market and whenever he saw a woman selling addled eggs or rotten apples or crushed berries he'd start bawling: 'What's this? Ours is a town visited by the cholera, and here you are selling spoilt food! I'll report you to the police!' Naturally the woman would take fright. Grisha Arzhanov was a citizen of importance, and if he reported a person to the police, there'd be the devil to pay. So she'd be ready to drop everything and run away, but here Grisha steps in: 'Too bad, my good woman. Here, I'll give you a kopek and relieve you of all this stuff.' And into his sack it went and his family was fed for a kopek."

"And he with his millions?"

"Millions."

"Forty, they say?"

"So they say."

"Well, millions make their demands on a man too."

Kozhemyakin mused on this. It doesn't make sense, he thought.

He was roused from his reverie by the fisherman's voice.

"Chowder's ready!" he cried, smacking his lips. "Hey, merchant!" he cried. "Come and have it!"

"Leave him alone, don't wake him up," said Tiunov. "He's wrestling with the devil."

They began whispering together and the sound lulled Kozhemyakin to sleep.

He woke at sunrise. Mist was rising from the silvery river, and through the mist glided a boat with the old man standing up in it. Bare-headed, his shock of white hair tinged with the pink glow of early morning, he kept bowing and lifting his arms as if praying to the dawn and calling forth the sun, which had not yet risen above the forest. On the sand near Kozhemyakin lay Tiunov covered by a piece of sacking. The red socket of his missing right eye stared straight up into the sky, his left eye was closed tightly and the brow drawn over it, drops of sweat hung like tears on his tense face and he kept moving his lips as if he went on talking even in his sleep.

He, too, is a lonely soul, thought Kozhemyakin kindly as he struggled to his feet. Why should he go about and stir people up? Yevgenia and Mark Vasilyevich—they'd been wronged, so it's only natural they should want to have their revenge, but what does he do it for?

In the distance the paddle-wheel of a steamer was rhythmically slapping the water.

"Sop, sop, sop," said the water.

The birds woke up. The clear call of a finch came from the bushes, a cuckoo hen laughed jeeringly on the hill and her spouse answered haltingly: "Cuckoo, cuckoo!" Kozhemyakin went down to the water's edge. Two snipe raced away from him over the sand. He undressed and got into the water. Its coldness made his muscles contract and filled him with energy.

I'm sick of the monastery; I'm going back to town this very day, he resolved suddenly.

He came out chilled and sat on the sand for a long time warming himself in the sun, which had now risen over the river.

"Nice, isn't it?" came the hearty voice of the fisherman behind him. "We've set our nets and now we'll have breakfast. Like it here?"

"Yes, very much," said Kozhemyakin, taking in the old man, who was standing in front of him with his feet planted wide apart, shaking his wet hair so that cold drops fell on Kozhemyakin's bare body.

"I should think so!" said the old man sitting on his haunches and scratching his chest.

"Tiunov's a rebel if ever there was one. Asleep now, bless him! He's got brains, he has, and he's seen things we know nothing about. He worked on me till morning, but I didn't give in—not me!"

His broad grin turned into a yawn.

"I can see he wants to make things better," he went on, "but they never will be better. They'll be worse, not better. Everything depends on people; there are too many people nowadays, and they're all different."

He glanced genially at Kozhemyakin with his big fawn-like eyes and laughed infectiously:

"The folk hereabouts go to the country in the spring. 'To breathe fresh air,' they say, and instead they breathe tobacco smoke all day long. What do you think of that? There's fresh air for you! Or else they go and shoot themselves, like that stranger did here not so long ago. And a man shot himself in Sichena last year. Well, let's go and have breakfast."

As he strode along beside Kozhemyakin he called out:

"Hey, Tiunov! Time to get up! Look where the sun is!"

Tiunov jumped up, looked about him and hurried down to the river, undressing as he went. He plunged into the water, ducked himself noisily three times, came out and began to pray. Naked, his body gilded by the sun, his elbows pressed close to his sides, he crossed himself hurriedly with little bows and jerks of his head that sent drops of water flashing about his shoulders. Then he pulled on his clothes and went to the dug-out, where, after greeting everyone, he sat down on the sand and said with satisfaction:

"It's a great thing to pray to God at sunrise in the fresh air."

"But is it right to say your prayers naked?" asked the fisherman.

"Perhaps not, but I had to dry myself."

After breakfast they got into a boat, the half-witted youth took the oars, and the old man, standing knee-deep in the river, said to Kozhemyakin:

"Come again, don't wait for him to bring you. We'll just sit about and say nothing. I like quiet folk. These talkers get on my nerves, especially one-eyed ones."

Throwing back his shaggy grey head and opening wide his bearded mouth, he laughed like a goblin with the sun pouring down on him, bringing out the colour of his pink shirt and patched blue trousers.

"There's a man for you!" said Tiunov, shaking his scraggy little beard. "There never was a better or more honest one, and he's clever, too—he's got something to say that's worth listening to; but what's the use of it? Sometimes I can't help thinking he's good because he's lazy: here, take what I've got and leave me in peace."

I've heard that before, thought Kozhemyakin with a start, remembering Markusha.

Tiunov mused a little, then said:

"When I think of all the men of his sort I've met! More than you could count. All of them good as gold, and all lazy. Fishing's the laziest of all occupations."

He reminds me of Pushkaryov, thought Kozhemyakin. If Shakir was to die I'd take him on in his place.

In a few days Kozhemyakin realized that this grimy, one-eyed companion had become essential to him and had great influence over him.

"The most important thing," Tiunov would say mysteriously, "is that every man should know and respect the class he comes from. His class is like his family. It's all wrong when a man says: 'I'm not a peasant, I'm a fisher-

man,' or: 'I'm not from the middle class, I'm a merchant.' That divides people, and what they need is to join together, tighten their ranks. Look at the gentlefolk. There was a time when they picked their police officers themselves, and to this day the Marshals of the Nobility are all of their own choosing. When all the people line up in their own ranks it'll be easy to see where the strength lies and who ought to hold power. Plain as the nose on your face. Every number is made up of digits, and all the digits ought to stick together, and each ought to know he's not just a pencil stroke; he's a living force. That's the only way to make the nobodies respect him. When a man goes rushing here, there and everywhere he spoils the game for himself and his whole class, and that's why we see pawns foolishly turned into kings."

"True," said Kozhemyakin, thinking of Maxim.

Tiunov took Kozhemyakin to a concert held at the local Riding Academy for the benefit of the victims of the famine. It was hot and crowded in the building and a military band was playing. Half-naked women in colourful gowns came out on the improvised stage and sang in high, piercing voices. They sang solos and duets and later sang choruses together with men in skimpy dress-suits.

"Look," droned Tiunov, "as a result of this calamity certain people move into the limelight, and who are they? That one's the wife of an engineer, that one's a teacher, that one's the wife of a lawyer and a Jewess into the bargain. They're mostly Jews and Germans here. Very few Russians. No merchants at all. Why's that? Who's closer to the starving peasant: these foreigners or the Russian merchants? Look what's happening: one group retires and gives place to another. If it wasn't for this famine nobody'd ever know who these people were, but thanks to calamity, they're getting the reputation of being great and generous."

He and Kozhemyakin were perched like two cocks on high benches, and all about them were sullen, bored

people. Sitting even higher were young people who clapped and cried out and stamped their feet. The planks on which they were sitting creaked and groaned under their weight and Kozhemyakin waited in fear and trembling for the whole structure to collapse and send them crashing down to where the eminent citizens were sitting in proper rows, the bare shoulders of the women shining in the lamplight and their arms flashing as they fanned their flushed faces.

"The trouble is, people don't know where they belong," whispered Tiunov.

When the concert was over Kozhemyakin and Tiunov walked through the streets of the town and Tiunov read aloud the names on the shop signs:

"Schultz—a German. Wentzel—another German. Buch and Mitchell. Knopp—look how many there are! Isaacson, Meizel—Jews. Where are the Russians? That's what we get for being idiots."

Kozhemyakin, too, was amazed to see how few Russian names there were on the signs. But he disliked Tiunov drawing his attention to it because he detected greed and envy in his words.

"A man's got to eat no matter what his nationality," he said.

"Plain as the nose on your face. He's got to eat all right, but let each eat in his own place."

"But what if the Jews haven't got any place of their own?"

"The Jews aren't so bad. It's been said: 'A Jew will march in step with anybody.' But the Germans? Today they're our merchants, tomorrow they'll be our officials, and the day after tomorrow they'll be our generals, and that'll be the end of us."

Kozhemyakin was deafened by the bustle of the big town. The crowds of people that kept passing him by and the multitude of new impressions made it impossible for him to collect his thoughts. Day after day he wandered up

and down the streets accompanied by Tiunov and his edifying remarks. In the evening, utterly worn-out, he would go and sit in a tavern and watch the loud, vulgar, pretentious inhabitants of this town, and think to himself:

Life in Okurov is more quiet and respectable.

He found himself irritated and depressed by the noise, the cupidity and the vain whirl of activity he saw on every hand. People rushed about as if they were afraid of being late for an appointment. In the day-time there was no avoiding the importunities of beggars and pedlars, in the evening the stare of street-walkers, policemen and dark suspicious-looking characters.

Sometimes he would be attracted by one of the street-walkers and inclined to buy her caresses, but he was always prevented by Tiunov, who stuck to him like his shadow.

"How many of them there are!" he said one day, hoping to launch his companion on a discourse that would damp his longing.

And sure enough, Tiunov, who was ready with an explanation for everything, said with chilling pedantry:

"Very many. It's not a very praiseworthy profession, but I'm not the one to judge them. All girls can't expect to get husbands, that's clear, and who wants to bring beggars into the world? Besides, if men didn't have such women to play with they'd start breaking into families. You and I know well enough the women don't put a very high price on their honour these days. So you see, even the bad has some good in it."

He's right, the one-eyed devil! Kozhemyakin said to himself, unable to suppress his growing esteem for his mentor despite the vexation he inspired.

Kozhemyakin conjured up a picture of another sort of life: he saw himself sitting among his own people in Okurov, talking to them about all sorts of things in calm, impressive tones, while they sat listening with rapt attention.

I could tell them lots of things now, he thought. But how shall I ever return home? It would cause a sensation.

Turning to Tiunov he said:

"Have you ever had anything to do with the courts?"

"Yes, indeed—used to make speeches at the district court," he said with a proud toss of his head. "Speeches in defence of the downtrodden. But that's forbidden now —no one's allowed to make speeches except lawyers with diplomas. The lawyers saw to that. They made no money when we poor folk pleaded our own case. See? The same old story. Besides which everyone is tried and judged by government officials nowadays, but do you think a government official is able to understand all sorts of folk?"

They were sitting in a crowded tavern. Kozhemyakin studied the people from under lowered brows and was convinced they were shamming: they seemed to be having a hilariously good time in this stuffy room filled with flies and tobacco smoke, but it was all show and pretence. Their faces were red from beer, vodka and the heat; they waved their arms as if drowning or getting ready to fight, they shouted without cause, heaped exaggerated praises upon one another or cursed each other roundly for the merest trifle, the next minute making it up and kissing noisily.

A music-box was playing, there was a blowing of harsh horns and a beating of cracked drums, all as loud as possible, and it seemed as if the people, too—these shop assistants, artisans, clerks and tradesmen—were, like the music-box, wound up to be gay, but were broken inside. They lacked genuine gaiety and knew it, and tried to hide it from each other. From time to time men who had just been roistering drunkenly suddenly grew quiet and bent their heads together to speak in grave and sober voices. As Kozhemyakin watched them he said to himself: Rascals no doubt, all of them.

He caught a glimpse of a wild face with staring eyes, as puffy and lifeless as the face of a drowned man. He

caught impressions of frightened, apologetic smiles, fierce frowns, bared teeth, the tightly clenched fists of those sitting by themselves. From time to time one of these would get up with bent head and pick his way cautiously to the door. One imagined he had gone out to give somebody a beating, or perhaps to confess having committed a crime.

And the voice of Tiunov stitched through the noise and confusion with the ease of a needle piercing rotten leather:

"There's no doubt about it: unless men stick together they're doomed to live in fear and trembling because of their lack of faith, lack of spirit. . . ."

To hell with it all, thought Kozhemyakin. I'm leaving.

On their way back to the inn he said to Tiunov:

"When are you going home?"

"What do you mean—'home'?"

"Okurov."

"Ah. I hadn't thought of it."

The big, unfamiliar buildings of the town huddled together and frowned down on people like stern masters wearing spectacles. Cabs rumbled past, at street crossings suspicious-looking figures vanished round corners. Streetwalkers hurried after customers; the uglier ones hid in the shadows of doorways from where they reached out and tugged at the sleeves of passers-by; younger and prettier ones lingered under the street lights and laughed loudly and shamelessly. The brass buttons of policemen gleamed in the dark. Odd snatches of talk were borne to the ear:

"I'll squeeze it out of him. . . ."

"Horribly in love. . . ."

Two drunkards came staggering down the street and one said to the other:

"It is for tough fellows like us. . .?"

Tiunov spoke in a low voice, but as usual he seemed to be shouting:

"I haven't exactly taken a fancy to Okurov. It's not much of a town—not even a railway there. Just a sort of jumping-off place."

"I was thinking we might go back together," suggested Kozhemyakin.

"It'd cost nine rubles thirty and a good two rubles for food on the way."

"I'd be only too glad to pay for it."

Tiunov paused a moment before saying:

"I'll think it over, thank you very kindly."

Kozhemyakin did not like his reply; there was something insultingly ironic in the "thank you very kindly."

As he lay in bed he thought to himself:

I'm going home tomorrow even if I have to go alone. There's nothing new in my being alone. I've wasted enough time hanging about here like a fish out of water—almost two months. I'll patch things up at home somehow. I'll go and speak to Mark Vasilyevich—let him act as go-between for me and Maxim. Perhaps Maxim will accept money for the injury I did him.

On meeting Tiunov in the morning he said:

"I'm leaving this evening."

"This evening?"

Tiunov compressed his lips and fixed him with a dark eye for a while before saying:

"Well, in that case, I wish you luck."

"If you ever come back to Okurov, pay me a visit."

"I certainly will."

"I'll be glad to see you."

"Thank you very much."

Tiunov was apparently in a hurry to be off; he kept shifting from foot to foot, glancing round and plucking at his incongruous beard.

An unfeeling fellow, thought Kozhemyakin as he took leave of him. Not to be compared with Mark Vasilyevich. Reminds me of what Komarovsky once said about vinegar:

he's vinegar itself. And Uncle Mark is treacle. Still, I'll never forget Tiunov either. I wonder what goes on inside him? He seems to have pride. It's true what they say: there's no seeing into another's soul.

When, early in the morning, he arrived in his own town, a flock of cranes came flying over the bare fields to meet him, and in the empty sky above them hung a buzzard, a mere dot against the blue.

Kozhemyakin viewed the town from behind the coachman's back. He frowned to see how small and faded it looked, crowded into the narrow valley between the prickly brown hills. It seemed to have withered during that summer.

In the silence of the morning he heard sounds familiar to his ear: a cooper was at work.

"Tap-tap. Tap-tap-tap."

And the cranes called:

"Phew-ee! Phew-ee!"

Scarcely had he entered the yard when he had a cold presentiment that something had happened. Shakir, more sallow and wizened than ever, rushed out to meet him, blubbering and snuffling, half-laughing and half-crying. He danced round him, seized him by the arm, and hurried him into the house, where he shut the door and stood in front of him, his wrinkled neck stretched out, as he gasped:

"Trouble, trouble, oh, what trouble!"

Frozen with alarm, Kozhemyakin made a vain effort to understand what the Tatar was trying to tell him in a low whisper and with much waving of his hands. At last he grasped that Galatskaya and Tsvetayev had gone into the countryside to take food to the starving peasants and the police had seized them, arrested them and brought them back to the town; at night gendarmes had searched

Kozhemyakin's house and had questioned Shakir and Foka on the whereabouts of their master.

"Foka told them you gave Maxim a beating—he was such a bad man—you couldn't keep him."

Hopping about excitedly, Shakir went on to say that Uncle Mark, Komarovsky, Rogachov and a man and his wife who worked for the Town Council, had been rounded up and sent out of town.

Kozhemyakin whistled with a sinking heart.

"A gendarme hit me on the nose and shouted he would put me in jail."

"It looks as if I would be put in jail too for letting them use my house," muttered Kozhemyakin, pacing the floor. "And did they take Maxim?"

"The priest's wife sent him and Avdotya to a lumber camp as soon as you went away."

So he's gone, thought Kozhemyakin with relief. Now he would not have to discuss the matter with anybody or even think of it.

Half his fear was supplanted by regret for the loss of Mark Vasilyevich. He did not care about the others. Thoughts of the police disturbed him.

"Did the gendarmes question you much about me?"

"Foka told them. Foka is a stupid man and he hit everybody. He hit me. He doesn't like work."

"I'll get rid of him."

He settled down to a quiet life, remaining at home all the time as if waiting for something to happen. He went to church regularly and saw the priest there. Father Alexander was as bedraggled-looking as ever, but he seemed to have grown more subdued: he hurried through the church service and smiled more rarely and less hopefully than before. On several occasions Kozhemyakin had felt an impulse to go up and ask him for his blessing and to inquire about his friends, but something always stopped him.

Time passed, bringing the old boredom. He longed to go out among people and talk to them. He tried talking to Shakir; the Tatar listened to his description of Tiunov and of the big town, sighed without making any comment and dropped his eyes, now faded and watery.

One day he said:

"Life cannot be better. Good people are driven away and not allowed to live. There must be a strong hand, a clever hand, to rule everything. If people are not good, there can be no good life."

Foka dressed himself in a red blouse and black trousers and tied a girdle made by the nuns round his waist, which made him look like a publican. He, too, seemed to be waiting for something. He would go out into the yard and stand with his feet wide apart and his thumbs in his girdle, staring with glassy eyes at the gate.

"What are you doing here?" Kozhemyakin once asked him.

He spat.

"Nothing," he said.

"Waiting for somebody?"

"Who should I wait for? I'm not from these parts."

In the kitchen after supper Orina, the goitrous cook, would search his head for lice and tell him fairy-tales as if he were a little child. From time to time he would glance up into her face with a snort and cry:

"Easy there! You're pulling my hair! I've heard that story before, tell me another."

Kozhemyakin came to fear him. Lacking the courage to dismiss him, he decided to sell the rope works and remain alone with Shakir. But he was sorry to part with the house.

I'll simply close down my business in the spring, he decided at last. What do I want with it anyway?

He tried reading the books Uncle Mark had left behind him. One of them began:

"In the preceding volume of this work . . . ."

And another:

"Culture, or rather civilization, in the broad, ethnographic sense of the word, consists, on the whole, of—"

This is not for me, concluded Kozhemyakin after ploughing through the first page. He closed the book.

In his longing for human companionship he was encouraged by what Tiunov had said to him:

"A man ought to live with his own class. A man's class is his family."

And suddenly, with an ease that astonished him, he found himself in that family. One day he stepped in to Posulov's shop to pay his butcher-bill, and after a short conversation Posulov invited him to dinner on the following Sunday.

Alexei Ivanovich Posulov was a thickset man of middle height and with so long a neck that he was nick-named "Bottle." His face was red and as beardless as a eunuch's except for tufts of reddish fuzz at the corners of his mouth. His head was covered with bumps and in place of eyebrows he had two lumps overhanging little slits of eyes. He had a habit of dilating the nostrils of his broad nose as he noisily drew in his breath and grunted as if holding back something that was trying to escape from between his tight lips. He spoke little and jerkily but he listened to others with attention, turning a large thickened ear towards the voice and making his slits of eyes even narrower.

His wife, Marfa Ignatyevna, was nearly a head taller than he and looked like a doll. She was round and plump, had a smooth white throat and a face like porcelain with big blue eyes very precisely drawn on it. She had bright red lips that invariably curved in a smile when she spoke, and this smile, too, seemed drawn on her face and its implication was:

"You may think what you please, of course, but I know what I'm talking about."

They had dinner in a little dark room cluttered with furniture. On one wall hung a picture of a fire; the flames were painted in broad red strokes that flowed down over the frame like blood. The host and hostess spoke in lowered tones as if they were afraid of waking someone in whom they stood in awe.

"Here, pass me the pepper," said Bottle to his wife. "Can't you see I need it?"

She lifted her plump white arm with a smile, then once more settled back like a fluffy white cake.

Kozhemyakin was put out of countenance by Posulov's rudeness to his wife. He squirmed, and at one point, when he was particularly distressed, he said to his hostess:

"A stern husband you've got."

"He's always cross in the day-time," she answered serenely.

Her husband's expression instantly softened and he said more affably:

"How else is a man to talk to women? They're donkeys."

A moment later he glanced at his wife and his expression grew harsher and more disagreeable than ever.

He himself drank little vodka, but he pressed it upon his guest and kept saying to his wife:

"Napping again? Fill up his glass for him."

When Kozhemyakin declined another glass, his host grunted disapprovingly and the lids of Marfa's eyes drooped as if she were suddenly very tired.

Kozhemyakin could find nothing to talk about to these people. When he mentioned the Town Council, Bottle said:

"Thieves, all of them."

Kozhemyakin wanted to say: "But you yourself are one of them." Instead, he asked his hostess if she knew what had caused the fight at the Smagins' wedding.

"I left before it began," she said with a smile.

"Nikon Maklakov started it," said Bottle impassively.

"Our townspeople live like savages," said Kozhemyakin.

Posulov grunted and considered a moment.

"Donkeys," he said with relish.

Tea was served after dinner.

"Do have another cup," Marfa kept insisting.

"No, thank you."

"Oh, but you must. Just one more. With jam."

A smile like the sunrise lit up her face every time she looked at her guest.

Her husband just sat and watched Kozhemyakin drink and barked orders at his wife:

"Fill it up! Pass the cake!"

His sallow face glistened with sweat and his spleen seemed to melt away in the heat. Suddenly he said:

"Why do you live like a hermit, Matvei Savelyevich? Are you a man-hater or what?"

Kozhemyakin was so drugged with food and stupefied by the prolonged periods of silence that he could find nothing to say. Bottle blew out his cheeks and wiped his face with a coloured handkerchief.

"Do you play cards?" he said.

"No, I don't know how," said Kozhemyakin.

With a toss of her head Marfa undid the two top buttons of her blue cotton blouse and passed a hand over her throat.

"They'll teach you," she said indifferently.

"We certainly will," affirmed Bottle. "Come over next Sunday, I'll invite Bazunov and Smagin too. Will you come?"

"Thank you, I will," said Kozhemyakin.

His host became more lively, got up and began pacing the floor. He halted in front of the icon corner with its ten images in expensive frames.

"Do come, that's a good fellow," he urged.

Overwhelmed by a desire to sleep, disconcerted by Marfa's smile and unbuttoned waist, and fearing to lose his dignity

by doing something foolish, he decided it was time to go home. He said good-bye to Marfa without looking at her. Bottle seized his hand in a tight clasp.

"Be sure you come!" he said almost menacingly.

On Sunday Kozhemyakin was both surprised and touched by the warmth of the welcome accorded him by the town's leading citizens. Bazunov, highly esteemed as the son of his father, was now the mayor. He was very smooth and clean and wore a straight frock-coat that almost touched the floor, giving him a varnished look. His hair was oiled till it shone, his dark moustache and beard beautifully trimmed and combed, and he touched it as gingerly with his ringed fingers as if it were made of glass. There was nothing remarkable about his puffy face, nor about the face of his wife, who wore, rather quaintly, a silk kerchief on her head, a figured woollen skirt and a maroon-coloured silk waist. Heavy antique ear-rings hung down almost to her shoulders and she had mittens on her hands.

The second most important guest was Smagin, an Elder of the Cathedral. He wore a blouse, a full-skirted coat such as merchants affected and soft-soled boots. He was a corpulent man with the clean-shaven face of a clerk and watery protuberant eyes that had a hurt look. His wife was dressed entirely in black, like a nun, and she was tall and thin and had a horsy jaw and short upper lip that gave a glimpse of flashing white teeth.

The third couple was Revyakin, a linen draper, and his wife. He was tall and loosely built, with a pointed beard and eyes that did not match: his left eye was light blue and immobile; it stared straight through people into the distance; his right eye was darker and kept swinging from side to side as if hanging by a thread. His face, too, lacked symmetry: the left side was relaxed and swollen, as if from a blow; the right had a lump on the cheek-bone and the muscles of the cheek kept twitching as if an invisible fly were forever biting it. His wife, Masha, was a gay little

magpie with a pretty figure, eyes like sloes, and an elusive expression on her dark-complexioned face. She was gaudily dressed in a red waist of watered silk trimmed with gold lace and a grey skirt with yellow frills and festoons. She kept darting nimbly about the room, a dazzling bit of colour smelling strongly of scent.

First they sat for a long time at the table in the front room whose three windows gave on to the street. This room was cool and fairly free of furniture; the big table in the centre was loaded with jam, cakes, biscuits and sweets. It reminded Kozhemyakin of the counters in the confectionary shops of Vorgorod. There was a rich smell of pastry in the room: even the looking-glass seemed to be smeared with butter that ran in yellow streaks down the frame. The middle of the glass reflected an oil-painting of a monk in black and with a sour-sweet expression on his face.

The women sat together at one end of the table near the samovar and chattered in low tones so as not to disturb the men's weighty talk, which was interspersed by gaps of uneasy silence.

Kozhemyakin noticed at once that he was regarded with wary animosity by the flabby-fat Smagin, and with undisguised curiosity by Revyakin, who smiled at him crookedly, one half of the smile disappearing in his puffy right cheek. Bazunov made his eyes as round as a sheep's and stared persistently at the picture of the monk, at the same time wriggling his ears in an odd way. Bottle frequently got up and walked slowly round the table with his hands clasped behind his back, studying the dishes as if calculating how much food had been consumed. The women, pretending not to notice Kozhemyakin, shot sidelong glances at him and exchanged whispered remarks. Kozhemyakin was disconcerted by the ill-disguised interest he aroused. He felt it was a hostile interest. There was something strained in the men's talk, as if they were forcing themselves to think and say things in which they took little interest. He was

aware of a general effort to make him talk—Posulov was particularly clumsy in this—and yet all of them, especially Revyakin, kept him from talking by always answering for him.

"For example, now, Matvei Savelyevich," said Bottle with a grunt, frowning and blowing out his cheeks: "What sort of pleasures would you call sinful?"

"All pleasures," said Smagin, giving Kozhemyakin a searching glance.

Revyakin screwed up his eyes.

"Even the singing of psalms?" he drawled.

"That's not a pleasure, that's praying," observed Smagin sternly.

"And what if I take pleasure in praying?"

"Hm, how shall I put it?" murmured Bazunov, his eyes still on the monk's portrait.

"Nonsense, Victor!" said Smagin to Revyakin. "A person laughs when he's pleased, and nobody ever laughed when he prayed."

"But if I come before the Lord with joy in my heart?" insisted Revyakin.

Bottle, evidently fearing a quarrel that might end in bad feeling, gave a loud grunt.

"Marfa!" he called out as if commanding a fire-brigade: "See to your guests!"

She got up, almost touching the samovar with her full bosom.

"Do help yourselves, dear friends," she simpered.

Revyakin kept on trying to make his point, waving a long bony hand at Smagin:

"The only thing that counts is faith; if you have that, God won't ask anything else. There was once a hermit who went to live in the woods when he was still a child. Naturally he didn't know any of the prayers in the prayer-book, so he just said to God: 'Thou art alone and I am alone; take pity on me, Oh Lord!' "

From the other end of the table Masha unexpectedly entered into the conversation.

"You've mixed it up, Victor; there were two of them and their prayer was: 'Thou art two, and so are we; Lord, take pity.'"

"That sounds more like the truth," said Bazunov, nodding at her approvingly.

"Not at all," said Smagin. "God is one, not two."

"But they didn't know that," cried Masha.

"They ought to know. Isn't that what we learn on Trinity Sunday?"

"Who keeps Trinity in the woods?"

"In the woods?" said Smagin, reddening and shaking his head.

No matter what turn the talk took, the Elder of the Cathedral always set himself against the others; Revyakin took up the argument with zeal, and soon they were inextricably confused and Smagin grew sulky. The host followed the quarrel without entering it, and when it became too heated he took Smagin by the arm and led him over to a side table, saying morosely:

"Try a drink of our own concoction."

Bazunov slowly followed them and Revyakin rushed down to the women's end of the table, begging them to admit him to their company. They refused coquettishly, and presently the room was filled with laughter, the rustle of skirts, the clinking of glasses, the smacking of lips and lavish compliments paid to the hostess.

The vivacious Masha took advantage of the moment to go and stand next to Kozhemyakin. She twisted her swan-like neck and patted her hair as she gazed at herself in the looking-glass, and suddenly she whispered to him:

"Don't play cards with Bottle, and don't argue with Smagin. They want to make a laughing-stock of you."

Then she adopted a normal tone to say:

"Won't you come with me to the side table, Matvei Savelyevich?"

"Thank you very much," he replied, pleased and embarrassed. "Perhaps you'll have a drink with me?"

"Why not?"

She took his arm and led him quickly over to the table, where her husband greeted them by crying:

"Look at that Masha! She's got the hermit in tow!"

Everybody laughed.

After the drinks there was more forced, pretentious talk. As Kozhemyakin listened he wondered why they did not discuss practical things: the affairs of the town, or the ravages of the famine.

At last Posulov gave a particularly loud grunt and said to his wife:

"Well, it's time!"

Plump Marfa called the cook and together they cleared the centre table. The women pretended to help; the dishes rattled as the table tipped precariously, and the women shouted:

"Careful! Careful!"

Masha Revyakina ran over to Matvei Savelyevich and said playfully:

"You come with us! There are four men without you, and we have only three players because Marfa doesn't know how to play. Do come!"

"What's this?" asked Posulov in an aggrieved tone, strikingly unlike his usual one. "Take Victor with you."

"I will not."

Posulov shrugged his shoulders and walked away dejectedly.

"See?" whispered Masha, winking at Kozhemyakin.

Touched by her solicitude, his spirits rose and he began to play. He was exceedingly reckless and this pleased the women greatly.

Bazunov's wife, who was the best player, stretched her thick lips in a sweet smile and said in wonderment:

"What bold risks you take, Matvei Savelyevich!"

"Men like him may have had luck time and again, and then all of a sudden their luck turns," murmured Smagin's wife in the tone of a gypsy fortune-teller. "They're a dangerous sort."

She always slipped her cards under the table and made the sign of the cross over them before looking at them.

"Are you a dangerous sort?" asked Masha, laughing and making eyes at him. Kozhemyakin smiled back at her gratefully.

At moments he took her to be frivolous and kind-hearted, at others he felt she was sly and hid dark thoughts under her show of gaiety. Sometimes an avaricious light came into her round eyes as they fixed themselves on her cards, and then her face grew pale and lengthened. Sometimes she shot a hard glance at Marfa and the nostrils of her pretty nose dilated and trembled.

She can't stand her, concluded Kozhemyakin, taking risk after risk.

The hostess floated back and forth between the rooms and the kitchen, moved between the card-tables and paused for a moment behind Kozhemyakin's chair to glance at his hand. Whenever he knocked on the table to announce his lead, she would cry out in warning:

"Oh, but you mustn't! Not with cards like that!"

Her breath on the back of his neck was unpleasantly warm.

The women finished sooner than the men because Madam Bazunova started winning and this made Madam Smagina angry and capricious.

"You and I have lost," Masha said to Kozhemyakin, wrinkling up her eyes. "But it doesn't matter. We've lost at cards but we may win at something else."

What is she hinting at? thought Kozhemyakin, smiling at her timidly.

Once more the big round table was brought in, this time

laid for supper. In the middle of it two little pigs lay grinning at each other snout to snout, one of them baked to a crisp brown and with tufts of parsley in its nostrils, the other jellied and bathed in sour cream, with a pink paper flower between its ears. Arranged round them like cobblestones were roasted poultry of various kinds, and an outer circle was formed of salted cabbage and pickles and sauces. The whole gave off a pungent smell of horse-radish, vinegar, laurel and black-currant leaves.

The men got up looking red and cross, with the exception of Revyakin, who twisted his lop-sided face into a smile and tossed his winnings from one hand to the other, saying:

"These are your tears, see them?"

And he tapped the floor with his foot as he sang the jingle:

I thought her tears would never stop,
They kept on falling—ploppity-plop!

His wife gave him a sidelong look and the corners of her mouth went down, but she forced herself to say playfully:

"Come, minstrel, sit down and keep quiet!"

At first everybody chewed in silence, but later, tired and mellowed by wine, they began to praise the hostess. Kozhemyakin observed them without speaking, and he noticed that all of them, including Revyakin, treated Revyakin's wife cautiously, as if afraid of being lanced by her sharp eyes. And he noticed that his host was trying to make him drunk, for he refilled his glass more often than those of the other guests and once even poured vodka into his beer. Smagin, too, noticed what Posulov was doing, and a gloating smile spread over his flabby face. Kozhemyakin was offended by this, and his offence congealed into a hard lump in his throat that made him want to leap up and shout at the butcher:

Don't worry, I can see what you're up to!

Posulov, evidently counting on catching his tipsy red-faced guest off his guard, suddenly asked him:

"What sort of a person is the priest's uncle—that friend of yours who lodged in your house and was taken by the gendarmes?"

"A fine person, one of the finest I've ever known," declared Kozhemyakin hotly.

Everyone sat without a word, scarcely breathing, and all eyes were fastened on his. Kozhemyakin looked round at their tense faces, their flashing teeth and their brazen smiles; Masha alone was frowning, and Marfa half closed her blue eyes as if she were dozing off.

"A fine person?" drawled Smagin hoarsely, putting down his knife and fork. "How so? Everybody says he's against the tsar."

"You can't believe what people say!" exclaimed Masha.

For the first time in his life Kozhemyakin suddenly felt a wild strength coursing through his veins, bringing clarity and simplicity to his thoughts. Never before had he felt so utterly alone in the midst of people, and the feeling drove him towards them in an irresistible tide. He leaned back in his chair, fixed his eyes on Smagin's big face, and said as calmly and impressively as he could:

"No, Ivan Andreyevich, you are not right. He and men of his sort are against hatred and greed and stupidity. They are fine men. They would never think of inviting a friend to visit them so that they could make him drunk and turn him into a laughing-stock. Instead of wasting their time playing cards and eating and drinking, they spend it reading good books about our poor Russia and the life of her people. These books tell why life is so hard and what can be done to make it easier."

Smagin blew himself up like a bubble and snorted; Revyakin, raising his eyebrows, bared his mossy teeth in astonishment; Bazunov wiped his mouth quickly with his

napkin, ruffling his well-trimmed beard and moustache, and seemed to be debating whether he ought to run away or not; Posulov, purple and bristling with indignation, whispered something to the women and squirmed in his chair like a witch on a hot skillet.

Kozhemyakin went on speaking in a quiet, convincing tone:

"The Lord taught us to be kind to one another, but we're always looking for the bad in our neighbour and pointing our finger at him and shouting, 'Look what a sinner he is!' We ought not to spend our energy on fault-finding, but on coming together in a friendly way and deciding if we're living as we should and whether we couldn't improve our lives in some way. I'm not one of those people, and I know that if we lived in a wiser and better way there'd be no need for them."

When he finished his speech he felt it must have frightened or embarrassed his hearers, so oppressive was the silence with which it was received. Masha sat with bowed head, pushing a slimy mushroom about her plate with a fork, Marfa stared unwinkingly into space, the wives of Bazunov and Smagin looked at their husbands.

"M-m," grunted Posulov; and Smagin, to Kozhemyakin's great surprise, struck the table with his hand and said with unexpected animation:

"You're right, Matvei Savelyevich! Quite right! We ought to think about these things!"

"That is ... er ... well, of course, we ought to think about them ..." muttered Bazunov.

Revyakin suddenly came to life, turned his contrasting eyes on his companions, and said, almost shouting:

"You've said the very thing I've been thinking, upon my word! Isn't that just what I've been thinking, Masha?"

"You think about everything except what you ought to," she said without raising her head.

Undaunted, he swept them all with a look of triumph and yelled, throwing out his hands:

"It's all because we live in an uncivilized atmosphere."

"The people have no strength left—a cropless year—famine; and the peasants are lazy drunkards. And we're entirely dependent on the peasants. There are plenty of men ordering others about and yet there's no order."

"Yes, plenty of men ordering others about," echoed Bazunov with a deep sigh.

Everybody began speaking at once; they interrupted one another without listening to what was being said and repeated the same words and phrases over and over again, exercising the greatest caution not to overstep the mark and say anything rash.

For a moment Kozhemyakin enjoyed a sense of victory. Success and wine mounted to his head, but when—after accepting numerous invitations to visit these men in their homes and inviting them to visit him—he left the house and felt the snow crunching under his feet, his heart sank, he felt dejected and involuntarily he said to himself:

What a poor lot they are compared with those others! No thoughts of their own, or even words. They follow whoever does the most talking like a blind man follows his guide.

But then came the thought:

Am I not passing too hasty judgement?

His new ties with his fellow-townsmen caught him in loops and knots, and he found himself jerked from one house to another. He darted here and there like a fish in a net. He went visiting, he received visitors, he talked, he listened, sometimes he argued himself into a bad mood, sometimes he was lightly scoffed at, but on the whole he was aware that people were interested in him, and he found this flattering. He soon noticed that his new acquaintances sought opportunities of speaking to him alone, and that, taken individually, they were more pleasant, kindly and

interesting than when in a group. They all tried to persuade him to be more cautious.

"I'll tell you frankly," said the muscular curly-haired cooper Kulugurov, "you're as innocent as a babe, Kozhemyakin. First you lived locked up by yourself and then you lived among folk who weren't your own sort, and it's made you sort of daft. You don't know what real people are like and what you say is childish twaddle. You'll have to pay for it one of these days, mark my words! They'll strip you of everything you've got and turn you loose as a beggar. And that'll be the end of the chapter."

He was told the same thing by Sukhobayev, a glib polite man with a mind as sharp as a stiletto.

"You oughtn't to be so free with your tongue, Matvei Savelyevich," he said. "You see, people aren't accustomed to the things you say and it gives them something of a fright. It's not so much the police as the people themselves who keep an eye on a man. I understand, of course, that your intentions are of the best and I have the highest opinion of them, only, as I see it, you ought to offer people what you've got more discreetly, as if you were bestowing charity with an unseen hand, so to speak."

Sukhobayev always compressed his lips when he looked at people and always gazed into space when he spoke to them. If his eyes happened to light on a person, they pricked like needles.

One day old Khryapov, the money-lender, said to Kozhemyakin with much winking and sniggering:

"That's right, out with the truth! Drag it out into the light of day and Vasya Sukhobayev will flay it alive. He can make good use of the hide, the rascal! I'm just joking, of course. . . ."

And he chuckled noiselessly, baring two yellow fangs. He was now sixty years old. Three years before he had stopped going to church, and when Revyakin once asked him why he no longer attended the House of God, he replied:

"I said my prayers for half a century without its making a better man of me, and now that it's time for me to take leave of this world I can't waste time praying."

After a brief glance at his hearers he added:

"I'm just joking, of course. It's just that I've gone weak in the legs: can't stand through a church service."

Of all that Kozhemyakin said, people remembered only what they found to be hard or even impossible to put into practice, and in rejecting the impracticable, they rejected everything else as well. Everyone sought to disintegrate his ideas. Like bits of broken glass, each reflected only a small portion of what he said without embracing the whole, and yet deep down within every man was hidden his own "little bell" which, if shaken in the right way, was sure to respond readily, if falteringly. Kozhemyakin tried to convince these people that if they had more faith in and consideration for one another, life would not be so boring and there would be less drunkenness. He also said they ought to hold public meetings at which all could come together and think of some means of changing and beautifying life. Everyone listened to him attentively and praised him for his good intentions.

"You don't know how to put it, Kozhemyakin, but you've got the right idea," said Smagin with a patronizing smile. "It's true, every class ought to stick together like one big family. And it's also true that when the gentry stuck together they held the whole of Russia in their hand. That's what the merchant class ought to do now: every merchant a finger of the same hand."

When Khryapov happened to be present he would sit apart blinking his watery eyes and listening in silence, and later he would take Kozhemyakin aside and speak to him in a hoarse voice full of suppressed mockery and bitterness.

"Ah, my dear man, this river of ours is overgrown with rotten weeds and you'll never swim to the other shore—the weeds'll catch you and hold you back. I know the sort

of people we have here. What do they think about? About where they can find a gun that will shoot their bird and roast it at the same time. In one blow—bang!—without any effort on their part. They'd like to bang their foreheads on the earth and see gold spill out. Sukhobayev is possibly worth ten kopeks, but none of the others are—five's too good a price for the lot of them. Don't waste your breath on them. Try the young folk—you can put more hope in them. Take my grandson Vanya. . . ."

His eyes watered more freely and his voice grew mellow.

"There's a lad who's going to take his fate in his own hands! He wasn't five years old when he stopped being afraid of the dark; he'd go anywhere at night by himself and he wasn't afraid of beetles either—he'd tear their wings off to make them look like sheep and say: 'I'll shear you when you grow up.' I'm just joking, of course."

He gave a tinkling laugh and quickened his steps, bouncing up and down as if on springs.

Kozhemyakin rarely sat down at his desk and took out his notebook these days; surprisingly enough he discovered that these people offered him nothing to write about. There was nothing about them "to hold on to." They all merged into a formless grey lump; each, it was true, had something peculiar to himself, but it was vague and elusive and made little impression.

Kozhemyakin yearned for a friend with whom he could speak frankly about his new acquaintances and life in general, but there was not a soul in whom he could confide.

He felt particularly uneasy in the presence of Posulov. The butcher circled about him like a buzzard, staring at him without speaking and grunting as if lifting some invisible weight. This roused Kozhemyakin's suspicions and he avoided the man.

"Why don't you ever come and see me?" the butcher grunted one day, avoiding Kozhemyakin's eyes. "Am I any

worse than the others? You came to know them through me and now you've dropped me."

At last Kozhemyakin reluctantly arranged the day and hour for a visit. When he got to Posulov's house the butcher blew out his cheeks and said apologetically:

"A fine thing! Here you've come to see me and I've got to go away and attend to a little matter. Perhaps you'll sit with my Marfa for a bit and wait for me? Do, there's a good chap, I shan't be long."

"That's all right," said Kozhemyakin, somewhat taken aback by such a long speech from the butcher.

"Do wait for me. Perhaps I'll bring Nikon Maklakov back with me. You've got nothing against him, have you? He's a good sort."

When he had made a hasty exit his plump wife turned to her guest.

"Won't you sit down?" she said.

She herself took a seat opposite him and folded her arms under her bosom, making it rise disconcertingly. She fixed her eyes on him with her usual smile, which might have been pasted on her face.

"Why do you always stay at home?" he asked.

"I don't like going out."

"Why not?"

"You have to dress up when you go out and I hate to be all trussed up. I go to weddings though."

"There haven't been many weddings this winter."

"True," she said with no show of regret.

"All because of the famine."

"Really?" she queried indifferently.

He explained why famine in the countryside kept townsfolk from getting married, and as he gazed at her he thought to himself:

What a hussy! It's shameful even to look at her!

Suddenly she interrupted him to say in a flat voice:

"But look, you don't get married. Is that because of the famine, too? You must have lots of money."

"I'm afraid of getting married," said Kozhemyakin jocularly.

"What are you afraid of?" She seemed to be almost surprised and a slight change of expression came into her eyes.

"Of you women."

She leaned forward, her eyes narrowed like a cat's, and intoned through her nose:

"You don't mean it! Tell me why. What are you afraid of?"

Her eyes were fixed in compelling anticipation and their heavy gaze excited a very definite emotion. Kozhemyakin found himself at a loss for words; he feared her questions and had an impulse to cry out:

You little fool!

"Your husband's a long time," he murmured dully and, getting up, took a turn round the room. She sat erect and stared straight in front of her again.

She lures a man like forbidden ground, he thought, stealing a glance at her. I'll never come here again.

He left without waiting for the butcher to return, thinking to himself as he strode along the dark street:

Outlandish folk. I'm afraid to be with them for any length of time.

And then one day he found himself confronting one of those strange people fate was always throwing in his path.

Nikon Maklakov was looked upon in those days as the greatest reprobate in town. He was now over thirty, a swaggering man with an acquiline nose, grey eyes with an arrogant expression, and curly hair thinning at the temples. Kozhemyakin retained a vivid memory of the day in his youth when the two Maklakov brothers had given him a beating. Since then the elder of the two, Semyon, had married and was bringing up a family; he lived a staid, quiet life, had grown bald and his youthful recklessness was now

buried in fat. Nikon had remained a bachelor. He did no work, had learned to play the guitar and the accordion and spent his days loafing in *The Lisbon* tavern which Sukhobayev had bought from the heirs of the mad Savelyev. There Nikon talked all and sundry into playing cards with him. He invariably won from the inexperienced or the reckless, and when others remonstrated with him for cheating he openly laughed at them.

"Dishonest?" he would roar. "And what, you damned hypocrite, is honest?"

He was also feared as a philanderer, and he was invited to respectable homes only to play the accordion at weddings, betrothals and birthdays, for he was the best musician in town.

On market days he went to the pubs frequented by peasant singers, whom he treated to drinks and urged to sing, and if he was particularly pleased by one of them he would bawl at the top of his voice:

"This is as good as a funeral! Weep, you worms! Hey, Smagin, weep I tell you, or doesn't it touch your stony heart?"

Words of opprobrium dropped off his tongue like acorns off an oak-tree, hitting people painfully on the head.

He was always making scenes and insulting the town's leading citizens, his brother first and foremost. Once he was started, nothing could stop him.

"That fat body of yours weighs at least nine poods, Semyon, but your head's as light as a feather. How about a drink, brother? You're rich, I'm poor. My brother occupies my father's place now, gentlemen, but don't worry, he'll soon pop off and I'll be left as guardian of his brats. I'll send them out to work as sweeps and I'll drink up all their money or gamble it away."

Semyon Maklakov lived in mortal fear of death. Pale and trembling, he would turn imploring eyes on his brother and mumble:

"Stop it, please, everybody has to die some day."

Like all of the town's respectable citizens, Kozhemyakin was contemptuous and wary of Nikon. He avoided meeting and talking to him, yet when he allowed himself to listen to his ravings he found himself growing interested in the man, and in time came to look upon him as a lantern shining in the darkness—a dirty lantern to be sure, sooty and oily, but one that shed at least a faint ray of light in the darkness.

He made Nikon's acquaintance in a curious and amusing way. On going to see the Revyakins one late afternoon he was met by the drunken cook who, when asked if the master was in, laughed, muttered something incoherent and disappeared. Kozhemyakin went in, cleared his throat loudly and shuffled his feet on the floor, but this brought no response.

They must be asleep, he thought, glancing at the door of the bedroom. He made a survey of the room in which he found himself. It looked very cozy in the twilight with its window-sills filled with potted plants, its walls hung with colourful pictures, and one corner occupied by a china closet filled with glittering silver and cut glass.

He was about to leave when he heard someone moving about in the bedroom. Presently the door was flung open and there stood Masha barefoot, in nothing but her shift, with a carafe in her hands.

"Merciful heavens! Who is it?" she exclaimed softly, catching hold of the door-post. The next minute Nikon's tousled head appeared over her shoulder. His pale eyes flashed angrily and he pushed the woman back into the bedroom, closing the door firmly behind her. Then, barefoot, unbelted and with his shirt unbuttoned, he crept up to Kozhemyakin and said in a menacing tone:

"What are you doing here?"

"I . . . I came to see them," he stammered timidly.

"A fine time you chose!" roared Nikon, swaying backwards and forwards and twitching all over in fury.

"How was I to know you were here?" said Kozhemyakin apologetically, backing towards the door.

Nikon tossed his head and the anger suddenly went out of his face.

"What did you expect me to do: write you a letter saying, 'Don't come today, I'll be here?' " he asked sullenly.

"But how was I to know?" Kozhemyakin repeated, stepping into the hall.

"Wait. Sit down," said Nikon.

Tossing back his curly hair, he crossed the room, glancing at himself in the looking-glass and buttoning up his clothes as he did so.

"Masha!" he cried, "give me my belt and boots. Or wait, don't bother."

Again he went over to Kozhemyakin, stared into his face a moment, glanced at himself in the looking-glass once more and burst out laughing.

"What a mug you've got, Matvei Savelyevich! And me too! Good Lord!"

"There's no denying that," said Kozhemyakin weakly, forcing a smile.

Nikon dropped into a chair beside him, slapped his knee and said seriously:

"Oh, well, what's the sense of getting excited? Everybody does it and always will. You won't tell tales, will you?"

"You can depend on that."

"I thought so. I'll thank you for it if you hold your tongue, and I'll punish you for it if you don't."

With a glance at Kozhemyakin he added softly:

"You wouldn't want to hurt a lady, would you?"

"Of course not," said Kozhemyakin with a little sigh. "Who am I to judge others?"

"That's right. I knew you were a man with a conscience."

Getting up, he squared his shoulders in a business-like way and called out:

"Come on out, Masha. How about giving your callers a glass of tea, eh?"

She was blushing when she came out and her heavy-lidded eyes were half closed. Crooking her arm in front of her face like an abashed child, she swept over to her embarrassed guest with the noiseless grace of a cat and said softly:

"How shameful!"

She averted her face and smiled roguishly, holding out her hand to him.

"Don't judge me too harshly, Matvei Savelyevich," she said.

She was very pretty and Kozhemyakin could see that she knew it. Glad that there was not to be a nasty scene, touched by her simple appeal and fascinated by her beauty, he got up and bowed to her, saying with impressive gravity:

"Have no fear, I beg you; I'm not a scandalmonger. And, besides, I remember how kind you were to me once."

Nikon, also struck by her prettiness, pushed her towards the door.

"Run along now, run along, you shameless wench!" he said.

"Aren't you just as shameless?" she retorted, licking her lips with a pink tongue and flaunting her handsome body as she went out.

Nikon watched her go with a frown on his face, then began pacing the floor with lowered head.

"Well, so you've caught me red-handed, Kozhemyakin."

There was something unexpected in the way he said it, something meek and unhappy that won Kozhemyakin over.

"You're not too careful," he said, shaking his head.

"Her husband has gone to the country to buy laces and linen; the cook has her own affairs to attend to, and it happens to be Masha's birthday," said Nikon pensively.

"What if it had been somebody else and not me?"

"It would have gone hard with him," said Nikon, shooting a quick glance at Kozhemyakin.

He sat down beside him again and began to talk, looking at him with curiosity and a gentle smile on his face.

"I can't help thinking what a funny fellow you are," he said.

"Why?"

"I don't know exactly—you're so meek. You always hug the fence when you go down the street and hide in a corner when you're in church or a pub."

"Is that so? I hadn't noticed it."

"For whom are you always making way?"

"I don't know."

"Hm! You property-owners!"

He was a great deal younger than Kozhemyakin but he spoke as if he were older; Matvei Savelyevich was not offended by this, he even found it pleasant. There were lively little wrinkles on Nikon's temples where the hair had receded. Almost imperceptible, they reached out in rays from his grey eyes, which, though they gazed at him frankly and fixedly, did not have an arrogant look in them today.

Masha came in.

"The cook's drunk," she announced with a smile, and began setting the table for tea, turning and twisting like a kitten. Every movement of her firm body seemed to say:

"Don't be too hard on me; take me as I am."

Kozhemyakin found himself envying them, so simple and undisguised was their relationship. It was as if they walked about naked in his presence, but he did not find this shameful. He felt sad and could not help thinking of Yevgenia.

She held herself even better, he thought.

But soon he noticed that all was not well with these two. They had tea and joked about all manner of things, but from time to time Nikon's gaiety would leave him; his eyes would grow dark and dreamy, a deep line would form between his eyebrows and he would smooth his bushy moustache with thumb and forefinger as if making way for

the words he was preparing to speak. And when he spoke them they were unexpectedly spiteful.

As if to justify her own guilt, Masha gave entertaining accounts of the adventures of her friends that made her seem innocent by comparison.

"All my children have died and one of them was born dead," she said. "The midwife said it was Victor's fault."

Once she happened to mention the story of Christ and the adulteress, at which Nikon, glancing at Kozhemyakin, said sneeringly:

"It's always like that: soon as a person sins he tries to get Christ to excuse him."

Matvei Savelyevich was afraid Masha would be angry, but she only laughed softly and said in a singsong voice:

"How do you like that? You think he's walking along in step with you, and all of a sudden he puts out his foot and trips you up."

"As for Masha," said Nikon, "she can fall flat in the mud and pick herself up smiling as happily as if she'd just come from confession."

That's bound to make her angry, thought Kozhemyakin.

But again he was wrong. Masha laughed till the tears rolled down her cheeks. And the two of them went on scoring off each other, often delivering such hurtful thrusts that Kozhemyakin felt miserable and no longer found them so frank and straightforward. At last Masha was annoyed: her nose grew sharper and her firm little mouth twitched and parted, showing teeth as sharp as a rodent's. Kozhemyakin realized it was time for him to go and they politely allowed him to do so without trying to detain him.

"I have no house to invite you to, nothing but a pub," laughed Nikon, "so I'll come and see you instead."

And sure enough, two days later he did come, and with an air as familiar as if they were bosom-friends. Flinging his hat into the corner, he said gaily:

"Well, here I am!"

He surveyed the room as he wiped the hoarfrost off his moustache.

"Not very cozy," he said, shaking his head. "Easy to see you're a bachelor."

He approached Matvei.

"Well, what are you going to offer me?"

An hour later, pleasantly stimulated by drink, they were talking like old cronies, interrupting each other in their eagerness to express their ideas.

"What I'd like," said Nikon impressively, raising a clenched fist, "is to meet a man I could take off my hat to and say: 'Thank you for having got born, and the longer you live the better.' That's what I'd like."

"I know such a man," said Kozhemyakin happily.

"And to meet a woman to whom I could go down on my knees and say, 'Do what you like with me.' "

"And I know such a woman," said Kozhemyakin even more happily, conscious of the great advantage he had over his guest.

"Those are the sort of people we need. You show them to me. It'd give me pleasure to find a human being I could bow down to."

He beat his chest with his fist and shouted with an excitement greater than that stimulated in his host by the wine.

"This is the point: if there are good people in the world, then everything makes sense. Even you and I make sense."

Kozhemyakin longed to tell him about Mark Vasilyevich and Yevgenia. Feeling that he could do this in a noble, lofty style, he began:

"There are people among us possessed of great hearts—"

"Ah, brother, each of us thinks there are good people in the world when he looks in the mirror, but what of it?"

"Wait, listen to what I have to say—"

But Nikon got up and asked him gravely, as if suddenly sobered:

"Do you think Masha's a good woman?"

Tall and handsome, he strode about the room and came to a halt facing Kozhemyakin. "She's rotten through and through," he said, clasping his hands behind his neck and rocking to and fro. "You'll see; one of these days she'll knife me in the back—in the back, mind you. That's certain. She'll wait for the right moment and cut me down."

He spoke with calm assurance, which made Kozhemyakin pity him the more and fear for his fate.

"But—but why?"

"Just like that."

"Then hadn't you better drop her?" he asked, finding pleasure in offering advice to this man.

"Why should I?" asked Nikon, tossing back his curly hair. "Let her! It's amusing to watch her trying to find my weak spot. After all, what difference does it make who sends you to your grave? All the better if it's done by a skilful hand."

"And people say you're a gay spark!" said Kozhemyakin in a tone of friendship.

Nikon went over to the table, tossed down a glass of vodka, stuck a fork into a mushroom, looked at it, put it back on the plate, stroked his moustache and said, staring at his palm:

"What's there to be gay about? It's like walking along a deserted street late at night with no desire to go where you're going; the prickles run up and down your spine and you give a shout or knock on a window just to keep up your spirits and make sure there's somebody about. That's how it is with us: we raise Cain out of sheer boredom."

He drank a lot but did not get drunk, only mellow and talkative, and what he said sounded extremely convincing. A February snow-storm was raging in the orchard, clawing at the walls of the house, whistling down the chimney and banging the shutters.

"Think I'll spend the night with you," said Nikon, undoing his collar and stretching his neck.

He threw himself down on the sofa and began to speak in a low voice, but with the rhythmic swing and careful articulation of a professional story-teller:

"I've got a weakness for women but I don't trust them. Haven't trusted them since I was a boy, thanks to my mother. It's not nice to think ill of your mother, but I can never forget what she did."

Kozhemyakin was sitting beside him in an armchair with his legs stretched out and his arms folded across his chest, watching the play of expression on Nikon's handsome face: now his look was as frank and open as a child's, now it was supercilious, now indignant. And an odd thing: though his face kept changing, the expression in his eyes remained constantly pensive.

"You probably remember our father. He was a good sort, very mild and timid," he said in a low, slightly husky voice. "But he was not at all practical and he drank. The house and the business were entirely in Mother's hands, and he used to say in front of us children, 'You're the head of this family, Ustya.' Mother was a big stern woman with a mind of her own. She used to thrash us and fondle us and tell us stories. We loved her more than Father. When he was drunk she used to scold him and make fun of him in front of us, and we copied her in this—children are apes. When he was drunk we used to rub soot on his nose or put pepper in his nostrils to make him sneeze, we thought that awfully funny. Semyon invented particularly spiteful tricks. I loved my mother so much that I was jealous of Semyon and my sister Maria and I often fought them on that account. If one of them reached her side first I would hit him with whatever came to hand and beat him black and blue. I'm an old buck now, with bald spots on my hide, yet I can still remember the tender look in Mother's eyes and the softness of her hands and the stories she used to tell. She would hold

me on her lap and run her fingers through my hair as she told me stories, and I'd cuddle up against her bosom—I could hear her heart beat—and lie there without stirring, almost without breathing. They were the happiest moments of my life, lying in Mother's arms and nestling against her body. Do you remember your mother?"

"No," murmured forty-year-old Kozhemyakin.

"What a shame. It's true what they say: there's no friend like your mother. Whatever she said was law for me. If I'd been naughty I'd come and confess of my own accord and I can't remember ever having lied to her. She'd shout at me and spank me and then hug and kiss me and say with a wink, 'Tell Semyon and Maria I've forgiven you but don't tell them I kissed you.' She told them, too, not to tell me she had fondled them after punishing them—this was so that we should believe in her strictness. And then one day when I was about eight or nine years old the deacon from the St. Nikola Church came to see us—he taught us children our letters. Semyon was ill in bed with something or other, Maria had gone to Shabaldino with Father to see an aunt of ours, and I was sitting in the corner, building a house of cards. Suddenly I saw the deacon put his hand on Mother's breast—a reddish-brown paw with a silver ring on one finger. 'Wait,' said Mother, but I saw her unbutton her waist and he put his hands under her arms and lifted her out of her chair and led her away and I followed them. They locked the door behind them, of course, but that made no difference. I saw nothing but understood everything and cried bitterly—hid in the corner between the sofa and the stove and cried. I think the whole course of my life was determined in that corner. A long time passed before she came out smiling and swaying on her feet, but she almost died on seeing me. I'll never forget the look in her eyes. 'Good gracious!' she said. 'Aren't you asleep?' She caught me up in her arms and pressed me to her breast and shut her eyes. I cried and said, 'What did the deacon pinch you

for, Mamma? Put him out.' She kissed me again and shook me and whispered hotly, 'What are you saying? Don't dare! Forget it! It's all your imagination!' But I only cried the harder. 'That's not true—I know everything,' I said. Then she began to cry too, squeezed me so hard I could hardly catch my breath and cried bitterly. After that I promised her to hold my tongue, not to say a word about the deacon to my father or my brother or my sister, and she in her turn promised not to let the deacon come any more. She didn't keep her promise, of course. He used to meet her at night in the bath-house. And she began toadying to me, giving me sweets and letting me do whatever I wanted. And Father kept saying to us children, whether she was present or not, 'Mind your mother, children, and love her. She's the head of the family.' The deacon was fat and red-haired and snorted when he ate, and he used to give us a little whack on the forehead with his ring if we didn't know our lessons. Mother must have told him about me because he became very kind to me, but this didn't make him any more likeable. Soon afterwards a horse kicked him when he was drunk; he was laid up for a long while and then he died. I was glad. We got another tutor—a big-nosed, long-haired, jolly fellow, and it was't long before Mother was having an affair with him. I had formed the habit of keeping an eye on her—it was worth my while. Later a gypsy named Yelisei came to work for us and Mother took up with him. I once caught them in the act. Mother thrashed me to within an inch of my life for it, but later she took me into her bedroom and kissed me and wailed, 'Forgive me, Nikon, son, forgive me, darling,' but it was no use. Something had snapped inside me. I lost all interest in everything, didn't want to do anything or go anywhere, and I began to whistle—out of boredom I suppose. Wherever I went I'd purse my lips and whistle; I even whistled at table when I forgot myself, for which I got many a sharp smack with a wooden spoon. Sometimes I'd go out and lie on my back

in the weeds where the old bath-house had been burnt down and whistle up at the sky. Whenever I walked along the street some devil would take possession of me and I'd play all sorts of tricks—you've probably heard tales about me. At that time I was thirteen and the gypsy—no doubt to distract my attention from his affair with Mother—taught me to do things with the settlement girls who came to weed the neighbours' gardens. He was a nice chap, that gypsy, a gay, light-hearted fellow. Hm, well, so that's how the temple was turned into a pigsty."

He stopped talking and stretched convulsively.

"But there are other sorts of people, not like us. There really are," said Kozhemyakin in a voice that was almost a cry of despair.

And, leaning over, he said with feeling:

"Listen, I'll tell you about such a man. Have you ever seen the priest's uncle?"

Hurriedly he began to tell him about Mark Vasilyevich, easily recalling everything he had ever said. He took his notebooks out of the desk and read from them almost weeping, as if he were reading the service for the dead over the bodies of friends who had gone out of his life for ever. Nikon got up and sat beside him on the sofa, glancing with astonishment now at the notebook, which Kozhemyakin kept poking with a relentless finger as he read, now at Kozhemyakin's agitated face, which had lost its usual expression of apologetic perplexity. Two lamps were burning, and when the one standing in front of them began to splutter and send sparks up the chimney, Nikon rose softly and put it out, then tiptoed over to the table to bring the second one, which he put down without a word and resumed his seat.

The door was opened and Shakir put in his head to say in mild reproach:

"Eight o'clock."

They looked at him, at each other and at the window.

"That's spending the night for you!" exclaimed Nikon, drawing a deep breath and clicking his tongue.

Kozhemyakin, alarmed for some reason, shouted at Shakir:

"Very well, it's eight o'clock. What of it?"

"Time to open the shutters—the sun's up."

"Go away, brother," cried Nikon, waving the Tatar off. "Go on with what you were saying, Matvei."

"Bring in the samovar," ordered Kozhemyakin with relief. "And don't open the shutters. Fill the lamp instead." Turning to Nikon he said in an imploring tone: "Let's stay like this—let's not change the light."

Nikon nodded assent and drew his chair closer.

They became friends; Nikon all but moved into Kozhemyakin's house and the merchant came to like him better and better. Matvei Savelyevich was especially taken by the silent and strained attention with which Nikon listened to his account of exceptional people such as Mark Vasilyevich, Yevgenia and Tiunov. The first two astounded Nikon without raising any doubts in his mind.

"That's what I call people with brains," he said reverently. "I can hardly believe there really are such people—sounds like a fairy-tale. So that's where you got your ideas from!"

After a moment of glum silence he added:

"But of course people of that sort will never be allowed to multiply."

"Who won't allow it? The powers that be?"

"Yes. And us. We won't allow it."

"We won't? Why not?"

"We'll wipe them out."

"But why?" asked the astonished Kozhemyakin.

"I can't explain," said Nikon with a shrug of his shoulders. "But I'm sure we won't. They're like seed cast on stony ground."

Kozhemyakin hung his head, remembering how he had

behaved towards Uncle Mark and the people he had gathered round him.

Nikon was amused by Tiunov; the thought of him was enough to put him in a good humour.

"There's a rascal for you," he said, twisting his moustache. "All he needs is power. Money. Then he'd do what he liked with people."

Sometimes Nikon invited Masha to come and see him at Kozhemyakin's house. She would greet the master of the house with casual gaiety, then she and Nikon would lock themselves in Pelageya's room and Kozhemyakin would make the tea while waiting for them to come out, feeling both patronizing and envious.

At first he had considered Masha as ordinary as dandelions, but the more he listened to her the more he came to understand Nikon's strange and uneasy attitude towards her, an attitude glimpsed through layers of quarrels.

One day as she sat hot and flushed and dreamy-eyed at the tea table, she said:

"How I love to be alone on quiet winter evenings! I close the door and the room's all in darkness except for the flickering of the icon-lamp, and my bed's as snug and warm as a cocoon. There I lie, listening with my whole body, and not a sound to be heard but the crackling of the frost. I doze off and dream somebody comes and blows gently on my face; I start and open my eyes and there's nobody there. So I lie there waiting again, and sure enough, again somebody comes and bends over me and whispers something precious into my ear, but I can't quite make out what it is. Oh, don't think it's a man I lie and wait for—it's somebody quite different: perhaps an angel."

"Or a devil," said Nikon without looking at her. "What difference does it make to a woman?"

With a little laugh she winked suggestively at Kozhemyakin, indicating Nikon, and went on in her singsong voice:

"And at last sleep takes me up in its arms like a mother takes up her child and shows me all sorts of unreal things and gives me a taste of pure and quiet joys that one never knows in waking hours. Sometimes I even pray when I go to bed: 'Dear Virgin, giver of dreams, send me a happy dream tonight.' "

How pretty she is! thought Kozhemyakin, feasting his eyes on her.

But Nikon's voice rang out as harshly as a fist brought down on an empty barrel:

"Quiet nights like that always make me feel like ringing the alarm bell. One of these days I'm going to climb up into the belfry of the cathedral and let go—you'll see!"

Masha started as if she had had a sudden fall, then let out a little peal of laughter.

"Won't that give people a fright! I can see them running naked through the streets in the snow! Oh dear!"

When she finished laughing she suddenly got up and went home.

"Why do you always go against everything she says?" Kozhemyakin asked Nikon.

Nikon stared at him a moment before he answered.

"I want to get to the bottom of her. There's something standing between us, and if we're ever to mean anything to each other—"

He broke off and got up.

"I think I'll go to the tavern and have a game of cards with Bottle," he said. Then, in an off-hand way as he bent down to put on his galoshes: "You'd better be careful with that butcher."

"Why?" said Kozhemyakin, starting.

"Just because. Be careful, I tell you."

Kozhemyakin was frightened. Not long before this he had fallen into Marfa Posulova's arms as he might have fallen into a yawning pit. The butcher kept insisting on his coming to see them, and since Kozhemyakin did not know

how to refuse, he had gone a few times. On each occasion Posulov had found it necessary to go out on urgent business and so, quite against his will, Kozhemyakin was left alone with Marfa. He knew that Bottle was a rabid card-player and that his affairs were in bad shape. Several times Posulov had borrowed money from him, promising to pay it back immediately, but as yet he had paid back nothing.

Rumours in the town had it that Posulov beat his wife for being a bad stepmother to his son by his first wife. He had had to send his son to live in Vorgorod, and he seemed to miss the boy and be concerned for his welfare. Other rumours said he had sent his son away out of jealousy.

Kozhemyakin did not believe that Posulov beat Marfa, and yet he felt that her fine strong body was suffering some abuse.

What she needs is to give birth to five or six children, and here she is childless, he thought. What sort of a husband is he for her?

On one of his calls he found Marfa having tea, and he fancied she met him with more than her usual animation; her smile seemed brighter and more cordial.

"Is Alexei Ivanovich out again?" he asked.

"He's gone to Voyevodino to buy calves," she announced.

"He invited me to come, said he would be at home."

"He's very forgetful."

She sat in her habitual posture, very erect and as if waiting for someone. He could distinctly see the curves of her body under her loose pink waist; her full neck rose proudly out of the lace at her throat, her little head with its dark hair combed back smoothly swayed slightly and a faint smile flickered on her china-like face and in her hazy eyes.

"We heated the water in the bath-house today," she said in a nasal drawl. "Alexei intended taking a bath, but he went away before it was ready so I steamed myself for the

two of us—steamed and steamed till my heart almost stopped beating."

"It's a dull sort of a life you lead," said Kozhemyakin with a sigh. "A young woman like you—"

"Oh, it's not so bad," she interrupted. "If I get too bored I read the Prologues, auntie gave me a manuscript without the expurgations made by Mitry Rostovsky."

Leaning forward, she said with a little catch in her breath:

"Some of the stories in it are really indecent."

"They are," agreed Kozhemyakin.

"But they're about saints, aren't they?"

"Oh, yes."

"Very human those saints were!"

"That's why we call them saints."

Half closing her eyes, she said slowly:

"But there's no sense in our sitting here philosophizing."

I must put a stop to such talk, thought Kozhemyakin.

She spread her hands on the table and got up. Opening wide her heavy eyes, she repeated in a matter-of-fact voice:

"There's no sense in it, I say. The Holy Virgin likes to forgive people."

When Kozhemyakin came back to earth he was ashamed of himself and of her: it had happened so crudely, so silently, unadorned by words springing from the heart or by that frenzy of the flesh that defies shame and repentance. It was awful to realize that this woman, with whom he had just gone to the extremes of intimacy, had again become a stranger to him, alien and unsympathetic, and was sitting in her usual place, sipping tea and smiling at him over the saucer with the same smile, now showing a trace of fatigue. He did not know what to say to her, he felt sullied; he wanted to go away but was afraid it would be improper; he wanted to ask her something, but, unable to find the right words, he simply sat there pushing plates of sweetmeats and dishes of jam back and forth uneasily.

"Why don't you say something?" he heard her ask.

He started and asked suddenly:

"So you love me, do you?"

"I wouldn't have sinned with you if I didn't; and on Saturday at that."

She fell like a wormy apple, thought Kozhemyakin.

He did not remember leaving her or whether she had asked him to come again. Saying that he was ill, he kept to the house for a week, going over in his mind what he had done and vainly searching for some vindication of his conduct. Another thought, a masculine one, kept intruding:

She was the one who started it, so there must be something about me—something irresistible.

The remembrance of her sweet flesh drew him back to her. He went one morning when he knew her husband was at the market, and all the way he thought of tender words to say to her. He thought of many, but the minute he saw her he realized it was unnecessary to speak them and that he could not do so sincerely.

And that is how he began a loveless love affair, with uncertainty and a dark premonition of disaster in his heart.

He wanted to tell Nikon about Marfa and to seek his counsel, but somehow thoughts of Marfa left his mind completely whenever Nikon put in an appearance.

As for Marfa, having quickly got used to him, she became more talkative, more ardent and more exacting. And she displayed a pressing inquisitiveness that made him more and more indignant. As she caressed him she would whisper into his ear:

"Tell me how it all started between you and your stepmother."

"How can you ask?" he would say. "One doesn't chatter about such things."

"Well then, with that—that gentlewoman?"

Her eyes would narrow till they were mere slits and her whole body would tremble as if she were seething inside. Kozhemyakin would be too angry to speak and sometimes he even had an impulse to strike her.

Then she herself would begin telling him about affairs between men and women: some of them amusing, others bestial and horrifying. Although ashamed, he could not help listening, and at times he even questioned her about these savage relations.

"Aha!" she would cry triumphantly, though with a sense of injury. "You expect me to tell you, but you refuse to tell me."

"That's not nice, Marfa."

"Nice to do, but not nice to talk about, is that it?"

"How have such stories ever reached the ears of a young woman like you? You probably just make them up."

In her indignation she would tell him other filthy stories to confirm the truth of the earlier ones.

"Ours is a rich settlement, people are healthy and well-fed, the boys and girls are handsome and their parents are not strict. According to our sect, love isn't a sin—we're not Orthodox like you. So listen: the Moryanovs married off their son Karp—the last child he was, and turned out thin and puny—"

The next minute Kozhemyakin was laughing and blushing and saying to her:

"Stop it, you bitch."

But sometimes, worn-out and disgusted by her stories, he would say:

"If you've taken up with me merely out of curiosity, merely to worm your way into my affairs, it's a low and unwholesome sort of curiosity."

"Oh, of course, you're such a saint," she would retort, pouting and turning away.

Nikon's warning quickened all the suspicions and dislike he felt for Marfa and Posulov. The butcher borrowed money from him more and more frequently and persistently

avoided him when he came to his house. If he happened to meet him at a friend's house or in the tavern, he would steal up to him and whisper over his shoulder:

"Hullo. How are you getting on?"

His fingers twitched, he rubbed his hands together and screwed up his face and his eyes, which formerly he had kept averted, now stared at him directly.

"Marfa said you paid us a visit the day before yesterday?"

"Ye-es."

"There, now! I'll be needing ten rubles until Saturday if you don't mind. Saturday evening."

For some time now Posulov had received money for every visit Kozhemyakin had paid to his wife.

Can it be that he knows? he wondered, but the idea was too repugnant to accept.

I must ask her, he resolved after Nikon's warning. She'll tell me if she's got any sense.

He began to live a busy life, constantly seeing people, and he noticed that all of them reached for his pockets. First one and then another of the town's businessmen made private offers to enter into partnership with him, promising great profits. The stalwart Sukhobayev was the man from whom he received most propositions; he would sit down opposite him and, dropping his eyes, say impressively:

"Of all your ideas, the most important is what you said about the classes. You were quite right in saying we must strengthen our ranks and help one another. And yet—at first—we must act separately."

He licked his lips.

His clothes were of the finest quality and fitted as if he had been poured into them. When Kozhemyakin told him he wanted to close down the rope works, he started and held up his hands in protest.

"How can you even think of such a thing?" he said. "Why,

it goes against everything you preach. Such a good business, and all of a sudden—nothing! The very idea! You yourself said we ought to spread out, and here you are talking of closing down of your own free will!"

He drew his chair so close that his knees touched Kozhemyakin's, and, gazing at him with burning eyes, said softly:

"Would you sell out? How would Sukhobayev do as Kozhemyakin's successor, eh? What's your price? State it point-blank."

Kozhemyakin was attracted by the lively play of expression on his face, the resolute look in his eye and, most of all, by what he had said about his business.

"I'll have to think it over," he said amicably. "I'm sick of those workmen and all the fuss and everything."

"I understand," exclaimed Sukhobayev. "Your mind's taken up by other things, organizational ideas that are bigger than this bussiness. I understand. But as for thinking it over—what's there to think over? Here you are: Sukhobayev, successor to Kozhemyakin, ready and waiting."

Without leaving his chair he persuaded Kozhemyakin to sell out to him. He gave him a deposit and pocketed a receipt.

"As for the fuss and bother," he said, getting up, "you can rest assured I'll protect you from all that. I know how important your peace of mind is to you, and as an admirer of your ideas I consider myself responsible for seeing that they have every opportunity to develop without interference."

Kozhemyakin was flattered by his words and highly pleased to have sold the works while retaining the house: a thing he had not counted on or thought possible.

On another occasion Sukhobayev met him in the street and said:

"I hear you've become friendly with Nikon Maklakov, is that true? I see. Then let me drop a word to the wise: in my estimation, there isn't a more honest man in the town

than Nikon, but don't play cards with him. He's a sharper. In everything else he's perfectly honest, but he cheats at cards. Forgive me for offering advice without being asked; it's just because I want to be of service to you in every way."

There was a look of shining candour in his eyes. Kozhemyakin gave his hand a friendly squeeze and took leave of him, thinking:

He's a rascal, but a pleasant one.

One day Sukhobayev called on Kozhemyakin when Nikon was there. They sat for a long time over tea and Matvei Savelyevich was surprised to observe with what interest and attention Sukhobayev, one of the town's leading citizens, listened to the rambling talk of this gambler and toper.

"Life's changing, but people are the same," said Nikon.

"Quite true," agreed Sukhobayev.

"And the children these days don't promise to be any cleverer than we are when they grow up. They play the same games and sing the same songs as we did, and they're just as mischievous."

"There I disagree with you," declared Sukhobayev respectfully but forcefully.

"Why, Vasily Vasilyevich?" asked the host.

"The children these days are more vicious and less trustful."

"Oh, that's true," agreed Nikon in his turn. "Nowadays little boys are more cunning when they fight, but less honest and daring. And they lose their tempers quicker and cry more easily than we did."

He paused a moment before adding:

"And it's all because of their mothers: it's the women's fault. They don't give the children enough attention because they don't bring them up out of love but in order to squeeze the juice out of them as soon as possible. Little boys ought to be taught how to behave; we ought to set up kind-heart-

ed institutions to teach them—and little girls too. It's high time we realized that what the world needs is wise mothers. There's something for you to think about, Matvei Savelyevich. You've got money; why not spend it on that?"

Sukhobayev raised his head and sat smoothing down his reddish hair and looking at himself in the looking-glass. Nikon locked his hands behind his neck and went on with a smile:

"If the women showed more sense, and, to put it bluntly, more honesty, people would become better. There's no doubt about it."

"Yes, indeed," acquiesced Sukhobayev in a low voice.

Kozhemyakin said nothing but he thought to himself:

Thoughts like this never occur to so-called 'respectable folk'; but they occur to a disreputable character like Nikon.

Aloud he said:

"I'll have to think about it."

Sukhobayev dropped his teaspoon under the table and ducked out of sight to recover it.

"If only there were more women like the one you told me about," said Nikon, throwing back his head and gazing pensively at the ceiling. "The women really are different nowadays; I don't know whether they're better or worse, but they're different. They used to be softer and sweeter; now they're drier and have a bitter taste. In the past a man would hover round a woman like a sinner round a temple, fearing to go close and wondering what words would touch her heart. And he usually found the right ones. Nowadays the women don't seem to have any need of them. And they spend less time in making love than in quarrelling—trying to see who can get the better of the other. They wear themselves out with these quarrels and grow old before their time."

Sukhobayev sat watching Nikon from under lowered brows, moving his thin lips and wetting them with the sharp tip of his tongue from time to time. On the rare occa-

sions when a smile came to his face it quickly disappeared and never changed the coldness of his expression.

On leaving the house after this talk, he politely asked permission to call on Kozhemyakin again the following evening.

"I'm always glad to see you," said Matvei Savelyevich cordially.

Left alone with Nikon, he said:

"What do you think of him?"

"He's clever enough," said Nikon with a little laugh. "Sometimes I find it amusing to talk to him. 'You've got a good heart, but you're no good as a person,' he says to me, and I say to him, 'You're a good person but you've got no heart at all, nothing but hands—sixteen pairs or more.' He just laughs. He's a man to be depended on. He doesn't waste himself on trifles and he'll get a good price for selling a man—you or anybody else. If it was Jesus Christ he was selling he'd cheat the buyers out of a kopek."

He gave a malicious little laugh, combed his thinning hair in front of the looking-glass and went away in a thoughtful mood.

The next day Sukhobayev appeared in a black coat that looked even smarter and fitted even more snugly than his other. Flipping back its skirts, he sat down and fixed his eyes intently on Kozhemyakin's face.

"Well, Matvei Savelyevich," he said, "I'm going to be perfectly frank with you if you have no objection."

And he hitched his chair closer.

"As you know, I'm considered to be a swindler and nobody trusts me. I don't care. All men of business are called swindlers at first, and later folk come crawling to them on all fours, and they'll come crawling to me, too, in time—but that's not the point. Naturally enough I shan't turn my eyes away from the sight, nor shall I try to put them on their feet. On the contrary I'll probably have a laugh at their expense and a good one at that. But to tell you the truth,

that's not the main thing for me. What I want is that people should respect me and not that they should humiliate themselves before me. Respect means that they'll offer me credit, whereas humiliating themselves is nothing but a stupid show, and harmful into the bargain. I'm a new man here, my grandfather died a humble cowman in Obnoskovo only six years ago; everyone treats me as a stranger and nobody is willing to offer me credit. And yet all your Smagins and Kulugurovs and Bazunovs and other old-timers are petty and old-fashioned and have no eye for business, and the best thing they can do is to keep out of my way and not interfere. You can see for yourself what they're like. And you were quite right in pointing out to them that we've got to change the way we live and work; we've got to live and work for the benefit of others and not like highway robbers who think only of themselves. We don't want to snatch the whole ruble away from a man: Here, take a quarter of it back in change, and be so kind as to make a new ruble for me out of the quarter."

In his aggressiveness he reminded Kozhemyakin of the old soldier Pushkaryov. Matvei knew that the townsfolk held him in contempt and said all sorts of nasty things about him behind his back.

What is he after? he wondered as he watched his caller rubbing his thin hands between his knees and rocking to and fro on his chair.

"Now what is it I want of you?" said Sukhobayev as if he had read Kozhemyakin's thoughts. His face broke out in red blotches as he answered the question: "I want you to help me put in practice your good ideas, so as to stir things up and raise myself in the world. I can see that a man of your moral outlook would be only too glad to invest his capital in some good cause, am I right?

"Oh, yes," said Kozhemyakin, although he had never thought of this before.

"Well, then—"

Blinking as if he were blind, Sukhobayev moved his chair even closer, put his hands on Kozhemyakin's knees, and said persuasively:

"Wouldn't the best thing be for you to increase your capital first? How much interest does the bank pay you? Wouldn't you like to get one per cent more?"

"Three per cent," said Kozhemyakin.

"Come, you're joking."

Sukhobayev got up, straight as a ramrod, and considered for a moment.

"How much money could you give me?" he asked.

"Fifty thousand."

"Too little. You must have twice as much and even more. Give it all."

"I'm afraid to," said Kozhemyakin with a little laugh.

"I'll give you promissory notes and offer my house, land and tavern as security."

He sat down again and proceeded in a tone indicating that everything was settled.

"Look how things stand: Bazunov's not the man to run this town; he's never done anything to speak of and never will. I'm the one who ought to run it."

He looked so truculent that Kozhemyakin could not help laughing.

"Yes I am," reiterated Sukhobayev undaunted. "And you could help me towards it by talking about me. And if I do get the post, not only will the whole town profit by the change, but your money will be more secure and the realizing of all your plans will be in your own hands. I should act as your obedient servant and executive. How would you like that? A sure game with no risks. Vasily Sukhobayev will carry out all the fine ideas and projects of Matvei Kozhemyakin!"

He jumped up, pale and shaking with excitement.

"In five years I'll turn the town upside down. Let's shake hands on it and say a prayer."

"No," said Kozhemyakin. "I must think it over. It's all too sudden."

"All the good in this world has been done suddenly, without waste of time and words," said Sukhobayev weightily. "And upon my word that's because the only thing a Russian is capable of thinking about is how to escape the necessity of doing something. I hope you'll forgive my saying so."

When he had gone Kozhemyakin found the room hot and stuffy and he felt something heavy inside his chest that seemed to swing perilously from side to side.

They'll seize upon everything I have when I die, he thought bitterly. I must make a will leaving everything to the town. I have nobody else to leave it to. Once my will is made I can consider his proposition. A cunning fellow! He'll get what he wants by hook or by crook. If I'm not careful he'll rob me of all I've got. But what difference does it make who robs me? And I think he really will do what he promises.

It was in this mood that he went a few days later to see Marfa Posulova. Melted by her caresses and filled with a longing to tell her what was on his mind, he said:

"I've decided to invest all my money in Sukhobayev's business. What's money to me? I'm all alone and when I die others will help themselves to it. He promises to—"

Slowly Marfa raised herself to a sitting position, then she covered her face with her hands and began to wail softly. Kozhemyakin, surprised and frightened, sprang off the bed and seized her by the shoulders.

"What's the matter? Why are you crying?"

She did not answer, but her tears flowed on and she continued to wail like a wolf:

"O-o-o. O-o-o!"

Her shift fell off her shoulders, her big white body shook and seemed to be swelling, and copious tears flowed between her fingers.

"What is it?" he insisted, trying to draw her hands away from her face, but she pushed him away with her elbow.

"Go away!" she cried.

Swinging heavily off the bed, she turned away from him and moaned softly as she drew on her clothes:

"You're thieves, all of you—"

Kozhemyakin, too, dressed quickly and went out of the dim bedroom, lit only by the icon-lamp, into the drawing-room, where he sat down and gazed about him in a sort of daze, aware that something ugly had happened. Marfa came out holding the shawl which she had thrown over her head across her face and said testily:

"What are you sitting here for? Get out, I tell you!"

He went over to her and asked softly:

"Why should I, Marfa? What have I done?"

"There's no reason for coming here any more," she said sulkily without looking at him; then, evidently terrified by some thought, she leaned against the wall.

"Oh-o-o, what's going to happen to me now?" she wailed in despair.

At this Kozhemyakin snatched the shawl off her head and squeezed her cheeks between his hands.

"Does your husband know?" he said hoarsely, choking with fury and disgust.

"Let me go!" she cried angrily, pushing him away with her plump hands.

"Look at me: does he know? Did you have an agreement with him to do this?"

She slipped out of his grasp and ran to the door from where she turned flashing eyes upon him and whispered hurriedly, blushing and shaking her fist at him:

"Do you think I did it for love of you, you dolt? This for you!"

She snapped her fingers at him and began banging her forehead against the door.

"O-o-o," she wailed, "what'll happen to me now? You're a lot of swine!"

"What's this?" roared Kozhemyakin, turning on her. But when he had given vent to his feelings by pouring out a stream of foul language, he suddenly felt sorry for her.

She leaped up with starting eyes from where she had sunk on to the floor and shrieked:

"Shut your mouth, you toad!"

Kozhemyakin caught her in his arms and kissed her wet face.

"Forgive me," he said. "I shouldn't have said that. Forgive me, you poor little lamb, you can't even imagine how I pity you. So he sold you like he sells meat, butcher that he is! Why didn't you tell me straight away?"

"Let me go," she said weakly, somewhat placated by his tenderness. Her eyes roamed round the room as if seeking something and her hands were trembling.

He could have wept with pity for her, but his heart was still smouldering.

"Why did he do it? For money?" he asked.

"How do I know?"

"What do you think? What was he after? What did he count on getting out of me?"

Pushing him away, she sank into a chair and said roughly:

"As if I was interested in your filthy dealings!"

"But you were a party to them."

"What of it?" she muttered. "I didn't do it of my own accord; he answers to the Lord for it."

Unthinkingly, merely to spite Posulov, Kozhemyakin said to her:

"Listen, Marfa, leave your husband and come and live with me."

She threw back her head and laughed in his face.

"A fine thing!" she said reproachfully. "And they say you're clever and have got learning. As if a woman could leave her husband! Only loose women do that."

"Do you call him your husband, you little fool?" cried Kozhemyakin.

"He's my husband by law; we married in church. Go away," she murmured, her eyes on the floor, her lips pursed. Presently she said distinctly:

"And Nikolai's away. Oh dear! Oh dear!"

"Who's Nikolai?"

"Nobody. What's it to you?" she cried.

The room was dark and cluttered with furniture. Kozhemyakin bumped into chairs and tables as he paced up and down like a tired mouse in a trap.

"I thought you were at least someone I could talk to," she grumbled, "but all you can do is snort like the others."

Her face looked different: it was white and trembling and her eyes, wide and blank, were staring into space.

"Good-bye," said Kozhemyakin, holding out his hand.

She lifted a shoulder and turned away without taking it.

"Go away, and may God forgive you," she said.

Kozhemyakin walked along the street with a swarm of angry thoughts buzzing in his head. He longed to hurt and insult Posulov in a way he would never forget.

The horizon at the end of a long stretch of faded fields was banked with leaden clouds, from which tufts kept breaking away and creeping low over the hills towards the town.

As Kozhemyakin walked between two rows of fences he thought to himself: I'll find a torn and dirty ruble and send it to him with a note, saying: "In payment to you for consenting to let me use your wife." But I mustn't, he'll only vent his spite on her, and it's not her fault; she's an unfortunate creature, and a stupid one. I'll give him a thrashing, that's what I'll do.

Having made this decision, he quickened his steps as if anxious to carry it out before he lost heart. He turned into *The Lisbon* in the hope of finding the butcher there, and sure enough, there he was lolling in a chair with his cheeks puffed out, playing cards with Nikon. Without

greeting anyone in the room, Kozhemyakin strode over to his table and said in a subdued voice:

"Good-afternoon."

"Hullo," replied the butcher, studying his cards. "What's the matter, have you forgotten where I live?"

He spoke negligently, without looking at Kozhemyakin, shaking his head anxiously as he scrutinized the fan of cards that he held close to his nose, as if smelling them.

Kozhemyakin hooked the leg of a chair with his foot and drew it over. He sank down on it without speaking; his lips were trembling. As he gazed sideways at Posulov he imagined what it would be like to drive his fist into that puffy cheek and that fat red ear, and the anticipation of the butcher's terror and humiliation made him quiver all over.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Nikon.

"Me? I've just been to see him," said Kozhemyakin in a hollow voice. "That is, to see his wife. A fine wife you've got, Alexei Ivanovich."

At this Posulov half rose, holding on to the back of his chair, poked his head forward and blinked his watery eyes.

"My wife? What about her?" he asked hoarsely.

"A fine wife!" shouted Kozhemyakin, banging the table with his fist. "Ugh, you butcher!"

Nikon threw down his cards and leaped to his feet.

In his fury Kozhemyakin could see nothing but red and black dots swimming before his eyes.

"But you miscalculated, you scoundrel!" he shouted. "I've given all my money to Sukhobayev!"

Posulov landed a blow in Kozhemyakin's right side. He staggered and fell to his knees, but the next moment he leaped up and would have struck the butcher had not Nikon forced him back into the chair and held him there.

"Let me go . . . I'll give it to him!" he gasped.

"Stay where you are. He's gone."

Nikon took him by the arm and led him away.

"I won't let him hurt her!" gasped Kozhemyakin.

Nikon took him into a little store-room filled with packing-cases, and when he was somewhat pacified Kozhemyakin told his friend briefly what had happened. Nikon listened attentively, gave a little whistle and laughed.

"So that's it!" he said. "First he tried to talk me into winning money from you at cards and sharing it with him. The man's a fool. Of all the absurdities!" Fixing Kozhemyakin with his eye, he asked sharply: "But why did you have to make a row? Disgraced yourself in front of everybody! Come along, we've got to silence these tongues somehow. Try to look more cheerful."

"Do you suppose he's going to give her a beating?" asked Kozhemyakin as Nikon pushed him ahead.

"What if he is? Doesn't she deserve it? Did he hit you hard?"

"It doesn't hurt now."

"I had no time to stop him. We've got to hush up this incident somehow," said Nikon very emphatically. "Stand those who saw it to drinks; a little treat at your expense will make them forget all about it. We'll have to lie about the reason for it. Remember what the Psalter says: '. . . and there be lies for the salvation of the soul.' "

His attitude reassured Kozhemyakin.

I shouldn't have done it, he thought.

There were four other men in the tap-room: Nikon's brother, Kulugurov, Revyakin and Tolokonnikov.

Nikon at once assumed a jolly air, took his guitar from under the counter and called out as he strummed on it:

"How about a little treat, Kozhemyakin? Something to weigh down our spirits and keep them from flying away. What makes you merchants look so down in the mouth?"

Revyakin came up to Kozhemyakin, clapped his hands under his very nose and cried: "Pop!"

Everybody laughed.

"Why did Bottle punch you?" he asked.

"Pooh!" said Nikon with a disparaging wave of his hand. "He's a fool. Kept asking for another loan and Kozhemyakin refused to give it to him, that's all."

"Listen," began Kulugurov instructively. "Posulov's not a man to be trusted, and altogether he's no friend for you. He's a rascal and you're simple-hearted—you're like a child."

"I don't want to talk about him any more," cried Kozhemyakin excitedly. "If he could do what he's done, he doesn't exist for me."

Revyakin was engrossed in catching flies and tearing off their wings, then making them walk round the edge of a plate, taking care they did not go off the track. Semyon Maklakov watched him superciliously.

"Flies are foolish creatures, see?" he murmured. "They don't understand, they can't—"

In an hour's time they were all drunk. Revyakin put his arms round the mellow Kozhemyakin and whispered into his ear:

"I know how it'll all turn out, brother; there are those who tell me everything—I know everything the day before it happens. I hear voices—"

Then, one side of his face breaking into a smile, he suddenly cried:

"Pop!"

Tolokonnikov, small and round as a ball, pushed his cat-like face into Kozhemyakin's, his whiskers twitching, and said mysteriously:

"Listen: a certain Zosima Pushkaryov came back from army service, he'd been guarding the borders—understand?"

"Well?"

"The borders, mind you. And he says there's a strange sort of people there; they're up and doing all night long, walking to and fro and round about, and nobody knows who they are and the soldiers were ordered to catch them,

and they kept catching more and more of them, and the more they caught the more there were—"

"Spies!" cried Kulugurov. "That means war."

"Oh no, it doesn't," said Revyakin, winking slyly at the others. "It doesn't mean war. I know what it means. I hear voices."

Closing his unmatched eyes, he fell into a blissful reverie.

Nikon leaned back in his chair, strummed on the guitar, chewed the ends of his moustache and gazed at the ceiling, while Kozhemyakin cast a glance round at his companions and was so pleased with Nikon that he laughed to himself.

Suddenly a figure appeared in the doorway and shouted:

"Posulov has murdered his wife!"

Everything whirled and heaved and moved away, carrying Kozhemyakin with it.

For the rest of his life Kozhemyakin was to remember Marfa's white face with closed eyes and raised eyebrows that made her look as if she were pondering the answer to a riddle. She was lying on the floor, one arm flung out with the palm open, the other on her breast with her puffy fingers clenched beneath her chin. The butcher had knifed her in the side. She must have been standing up at the time, for blood had spurted over the table-cloth, leaving one long dark stain and smaller spots beside it, while the floor was bespattered as with drops of red rain.

Kozhemyakin stood leaning against the wall studying this terrible picture: the blood, the woman's chalk-white face and her hand stretched out as if begging alms.

"Where is *he*?" he whimpered to Nikon. "The man's got to be found. How could he have done it? He put her up to it himself."

"Sh!" said Nikon, giving him a little nudge.

A tall red-haired man of about twenty stood supporting himself against the stove-bunk. His eyes were starting out of his head and he was trembling all over.

"Ah-a-a!" whispered the drunken Kulugurov, shaking his fist at him. "So this is what you've driven your master to! To Siberia!"

The room, and indeed the whole house, was filled with whisperings.

"The boy ought to be tied up."

"Cover up the looking-glass."

Even the police walked about on tiptoe and spoke in whispers.

Nikon seized Kozhemyakin angrily by the hand and dragged him to the door, but when they got there they were met by a little boy who cried:

"They've found him! Out in the shed! He hanged himself!"

"Stop shouting," said Kulugurov, pointing a finger at the dead woman.

An oppressive silence fell, all the air seemed to go out of the room, the floor fell away, and with a little gasp Kozhemyakin clutched at his chest and throat and plunged into darkness.

When he came to he was in bed at home, Nikon was sitting beside him and Masha Revyakina was standing by the table wringing out a wet towel.

"Thank goodness!" said Nikon roughly. "Why should you have had such a fright? Do you think you were the only one she slept with?"

"There are two of her lovers in this room," said Masha with a sigh, coming up to the bed.

"Jealous of her, Masha?" said Nikon spitefully. "Nikolai, their shop assistant, was her regular."

Kozhemyakin winced at hearing them speak so harshly of the dead woman, using her to settle scores with each other. He watched them through lowered lashes. Now they were speaking in hushed voices. Nikon, pale and dishevelled, was doing most of the talking; Masha confined herself to putting in a word, as sharp as a pin, from time to time. All the colour seemed to have drained out of her eyes.

Revyakin came in, smiling and blinking, and sat down at the table.

"Give me something to drink," he whispered, wiping his moist face.

He turned his right eye to the bed.

"Asleep?"

"What's going on there?" asked his wife, pushing the bottle of kvass towards him. He held it up to the light and squinted at it.

"The police sent everybody away," he replied with a smile.

The three of them sat with their elbows on the table eyeing one another and muttering in a way that filled Kozhemyakin with apprehension.

God in heaven! he thought. What if the same thing should happen here?

Revyakin kept twisting his head from side to side and the impression was that he had two heads, each of them one-eyed.

"There was no way out for Bottle," said Masha, drumming on the table with her fingers. "If he hadn't hanged himself he'd have been a beggar the rest of his life."

The people I live among! thought Kozhemyakin with a groan.

Masha ran over to him, bent down and said in a tender, anxious tone:

"Are you in pain?"

"My heart—"

Her husband, too, got up and sat down near the foot of the bed.

"I know," he said softly. "Sometimes my heart almost stops beating. The thing to do in that case is recite the sixth psalm."

He turned away his lively eye and ground out in a singsong voice:

"'Oh Lord, heal me, for my bones are vexed. My soul

also is sore vexed.' It's the immortal voices speaking, brother."

"What's that? The funeral service?" said Kozhemyakin roughly, sitting up.

"Stuff and nonsense!" said Masha, waving her husband away as if he were a fly. "Your heart never hurts and you don't know any psalms."

"Pop!" cried Revyakin, springing to his feet and throwing out his hands as if pleading for peace. "Have I hurt anybody's feelings?"

"Clown!" said Masha softly but distinctly.

Nikon drummed on the table with his fingers and whistled.

"One prays to God, the other whistles for the devil," said Masha with a sigh.

Revyakin pulled his cap down firmly on his head and turned to Nikon with a smile.

"Shall we go?" he said.

They left. Outside rain was pattering, wind was blowing, trees were creaking as they swayed and a gate banged. Kozhemyakin heard the sounds as in a dream, and thought to himself:

Will I be cross-examined?

Masha walked about the room with her arms folded, inspecting everything.

"What a lot of dust!" she said. "And the samovar was ordered long ago and hasn't been brought in yet. It's hard living without a woman, isn't it, Matvei Savelyevich?"

He did not want to answer her, but he was afraid she would take offence and go away if he said nothing.

"I need someone to make the house cozy," he said.

"I should think so!"

Her laugh sounded gloating, and this annoyed him.

"But it's hard living with a woman, too."

"Why?"

Laughing, she took up her stand in front of him.

"Oh, I don't know," he said uneasily, "but when I look at all these married couples—"

"Better not look at them."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that: don't look at them."

The cook brought in the samovar and Masha went over to the table, observing efficiently:

"The samovar isn't polished."

There in the soft light of the lamp she sat, a twinkle in her dark eyes, weaving a soothing pattern of words intended to take the sick man's mind off Marfa and dispel the fear lying like a weight on his heart.

"What you should do is to find a nice young widow who has had the experience of a bad husband so that she will appreciate you. It's not so very hard to find one—nine out of ten husbands are bad and the tenth is usually a fool."

Kozhemyakin resented her words.

"You mean to say there are no good husbands?"

"I've never met any."

"But I suppose there are lots of good wives?"

"One does happen to meet one every now and again. Badly as you men treat us, you can't spoil us altogether. We're still better than you—more kindly and at least as clever."

She looked straight at him as she went on in a challenging tone:

"Take me, for instance: I'm a good wife. Victor would have died like a worm long ago if it wasn't for me; he's half-mad, you know. Nobody realizes it, they laugh at him and think he's just trying to be original, but I know he's gradually going out of his mind. As for my living with Nikon, it's my husband's own fault. If I'm nothing to him but a woman, and that only at night when we're in bed, I can at least be as much to others: there are plenty of attractive men in the world. If a man's my husband, he ought to be better than other men, so that I

could respect him and be proud to walk down the street with him. Then I wouldn't want to play about with other men. Even if I did, I shouldn't allow myself to, and I'd boast of it to him: 'Just see, darling, that handsome fellow made up to me, but I remained true to you, and I always will, my love; even if I admit someone else into my mind, I'll never admit him into my bed so long as you treat me as your soul-mate and not just as your legal spouse or your housekeeper.' "

She drew her brows together and flashed out hard little smiles, as if threatening someone. Her voice was firm and her hands flitted like white birds over the table, very gracefully and prettily.

"Heaven spare me the life Marfa had with her husband! To be suspected and shouted at all the time!—no, thank you. He was no husband to her, just a man like any other and so there was no reason why she should have been true to him. I felt very sorry for Marfa but there was nothing I could do to help her; she was too stupid. It seems to me there are only two ways out for stupid and childless women like Marfa: the monastery or the brothel."

"Tell me this," said Kozhemyakin, feeling confidential. "Do you love Nikon?"

She half closed her eyes to consider his question before she said with a smile:

"More or less. At times. I like him when I'm with him, but I haven't much use for him when he's not there. I could lose him without shedding a tear. He's a friend of yours, isn't he?"

"He is rather."

"Then tell him what I said."

"Why?"

"Never mind. Just tell him."

"He'll be angry with you."

"He's too lazy." Then, after a moment's pause: "He's lucky with women."

"He's a good chap," said Kozhemyakin gratefully.

"Ye-es," she said, "but what's he good for? Nothing will ever come of him. Neither in trade nor in war. He'll never make a nest for himself—probably die under the table in a pub, or in a ditch beside the road. I had an uncle who used to say, 'Nobody wants the bad folk and the good ones die young.' He joined the *beguny*—there's a sect called the *beguny* because they run away from everything. He disappeared nobody knows where—that's what members of that sect are supposed to do: just disappear."

It was almost midnight when she left, and Kozhemyakin was sorry to see her go. As soon as she was gone he thought of Marfa, and so great was his fear that he suffered palpitations of the heart; this brought thoughts of death, which he felt to be lurking near: over there in that corner where the shadows were huddled in silence, or behind the couch, or over his head. He sprang out of bed and made for the window, but fell gasping to the floor.

He was ill for a long time and was cared for by Masha and Lukerya, the widowed daughter of Kulugurov. Her husband, a cooper, drank himself to death during a wedding party at the Tolokonnikovs; she lost one eye, and, having no hope of getting another husband, took to caring for children or the sick, or assisting neighbours with their housework. She was fat, black-haired and good-natured, and fond of the bottle. When she had had a drop she would laugh gaily and tell stories that were always about one thing: human greed.

"After dinner the Vedeneyev's granny would always take out a piece of string and measure how much pie was left and hide the string away in her pocket."

And she would go off into a fit of laughter that made the tears roll down her cheeks.

"Once I says to Bykov: 'Timofei Pavlovich,' I says, 'you feed your hogs better than your help.' 'So I should,' says

he, 'what need have I of a fat workman, but a fat hog's money in my pocket.'"

And again she went off into a gale of laughter.

It was as if the only thing she noticed in people was their stinginess and greed, and as if her only purpose in life was to testify to this. Kozhemyakin hated her stories, and her raucous laughter made him wince.

"Will she never stop talking?" he thought in despair.

Sometimes he would bring himself to say:

"Don't, Lukerya, I've heard that story."

"Have you now?" she would ask in surprise; then, after holding her tongue a little while, she would begin all over again.

"Once at the Brodovs—"

His illness made Kozhemyakin anxious to draw up a will leaving all his property to the town. For this purpose he sent for Father Alexander.

He was shocked by the change in the priest's appearance; it was as if he, too, had just come through a serious illness. He was taller and thinner, his eyes burned with a wild light in the deep sockets of his bony face and he reeked of vodka. He kept walking up and down as if he did not know how to sit still, pounding the floor with his heavy boots, casting his eyes up at the ceiling and smoothing his hair. The skirts of his cassock would fly out like dark wings, and in spite of his cassock and his long hair, he bore little resemblance to a cleric.

When Kozhemyakin told him why he had sent for him, he seemed overjoyed. He made the sign of the cross over him and kissed him on the forehead as if he were dead.

"So this is the end of your feeble revolt!"

Kozhemyakin sighed at the memory of the incident with Maxim.

"You call it feeble?" he said.

"Oh, yes; very feeble, indeed," he said, gazing at the finger he held in front of his face. "All of us are given to

revolting feebly against the forces pulling us away from what is near and dear to us. Russia's ailment (as proved by one of our great minds) is due to the great gulf between her intellectual and spiritual essence. Unhappily our souls are vessels filled with a poisonous fluid that eats into them. Oh, miserable Russia!"

He lifted up his arms and shook them, and Kozhemyakin, unable to comprehend his words and having little faith in what he said, thought to himself:

Just what is this Russia he talks about?

"A perpetual conflict rages within us between what is our own and what has been grafted on to us from outside and poisons our blood. It is against this latter that all of us make a feeble revolt," said the priest with growing vehemence and as if speaking to himself. As he listened to him, Kozhemyakin remembered Tiunov, who, although speaking softly, always seemed to be shouting, while this man, consumed by an inner fire, shouted when he spoke and yet his words did not reach the heart. It was exhausting to listen to him, and when he launched on a discourse about the *khlysty* and the *beguny* and other heretical sects that had broken away from the true Church, Kozhemyakin interrupted him to ask:

"Is your wife very angry with me?"

The priest came to a standstill in the middle of the room as if listening to some distant unintelligible sound or trying to recall something forgotten.

"What did you say?" he asked after a moment.

Kozhemyakin timidly repeated his question.

The priest sat down and pushed back his hair with both hands.

"She never gets angry," he said sadly. "She's a sort of judge who applies the yardstick of dull reason to everything and refuses to recognize anything that falls outside that yardstick."

He gave a sad, quivering smile and drew a deep breath.

"Yes, whatever falls outside the sphere of reason doesn't exist for her."

Again he leaped to his feet and flung out the wide sleeves of his cassock.

"But many things that are absurd, humiliating and fatal for the spirit, fall outside the sphere of reason—"

He bent down to Kozhemyakin, who felt his hot and tainted breath on his face:

"—and yet they exist."

"Yes," said the sick man, closing his eyes wearily.

The priest turned away, put on his hat and went out, trying to step softly in his heavy boots and holding out his arms as if he were blind.

Kozhemyakin felt ashamed. In one of the hardest moments of his life this man had been the only one who had not abandoned him, and he knew he owed him gratitude. But he did not feel grateful and he had no faith in the priest, who only made things seem even more uncertain and incomprehensible than ever.

The priest began to call on him frequently, bringing with him papers that he read aloud and pronounced as worthless.

Evidently he has nowhere else to go, thought Kozhemyakin with indifference.

One day when the priest came he found Masha and Nikon at Kozhemyakin's. He greeted them as warmly as if they were old acquaintances, and, after taking a turn about the room, came to a halt and stood smiling at them while they eyed him as a crow eyes a cock.

"What a charming couple!" he said suddenly.

Masha bent down to hide her blushes.

"Have you been married long?" he asked, coming up to her.

"We're not married," said Nikon hurriedly, biting his moustache.

"They're just friends," put in the embarrassed Kozhemyakin.

But Masha got up and said serenely:

"They're both lying to you, Father. I'm this man's mistress. Remember? I confessed to you not so long ago."

The priest's face clouded and he fell back, muttering something under his breath and digging his hands in his pockets.

"Oh, I see. No, I don't remember—but—yes, this is a special case. . . ."

He was utterly at a loss. After murmuring something else unintelligible he went away looking very pitiable, almost like a tramp, in his old crushed hat and threadbare cassock.

Masha went to see him to the gate and Nikon said as he watched her go:

"She's a mischief-maker, that Masha."

"She is," agreed Kozhemyakin with a sigh of relief. "I was afraid he'd call you to account."

Nikon got up and began to pace the floor with lowered head.

"I like that priest," he said as if to himself. "It's only because of him I go to church. He reads the service in a special way: very softly, as if he was telling us a story in secret, and a very cheerless story, by the way. Sometimes I feel like going up to him when he's all alone and saying, 'What's the trouble, Father?' But the fact is I don't really want to get into conversation with him or make his acquaintance. A funny thing: a bird as pretty as the kingfisher doesn't sing, while the nightingale's a drab, grey little creature. How do you explain that?"

Masha came back and planted herself in front of Nikon with folded arms.

"So you were afraid to tell the truth?" she said spitefully.

He raised his hand and gave her a little push in the forehead.

"Rubbish," he said with a little laugh. "Tell the truth? You just wanted to make mischief, that's all."

Thank goodness I never got married, thought Kozhemyakin.

During his illness Masha and Nikon became very much at home in his house and Masha behaved as unceremoniously with him as if he were an old man. This piqued him, and one day he said to her:

"You certainly are free and easy with me. Anybody would think I was a child."

She laughed.

"Oh, come now! As if you'd do for a lover! You've got a conscience. Look what you went through on account of Marfa, and what was she to you? A mere port of call, so to speak. Oh, no; you ought to be a husband; you were born for one woman and the whole trouble is you haven't found the right one."

When Nikon learned that Kozhemyakin had willed all his property to the town and had invested all his capital in Sukhobayev's enterprise, he said complacently:

"A very good thing: nothing left for you to worry about. Sukhobayev won't let you down, he'll keep his promises. He's ambitious above all."

Masha was taken aback. For a long time she stood staring at him with round eyes and quivering brows as if she could not believe her ears.

"Have you really given him everything?"

"Everything."

For a moment she stood biting her lip.

"But that's almost wicked!" she exclaimed at last.

"Why wicked?"

"Because—oh, just because." Then, with a sigh: "That's what comes of being single."

"You don't understand these things," said Kozhemyakin, offended by her attitude.

"No, I don't," she confessed.

For some time she said nothing, but at last, looking at him appealingly, she asked:

"Wouldn't it have been better to have adopted an orphan

and left everything to him, poor child? The town! What's the town? Just a collection of everybody."

He tried excitedly to explain to her. She listened, licking her lips as Sukhobayev had done, then gave a little laugh and interrupted him.

"Oh, very well; it's your own affair. And may your grave grow roses instead of weeds."

For the rest of the evening she was very attentive to him, but laughed at him again a little later.

"Oh, Matvei Savelyevich," she said, "if all men were like you we women would have an easy time of it!"

When he had recovered and began going out, it became clear to him that Masha was not the only one who could not understand why he had made such a will. Almost everybody looked upon him as a sort of pious idiot, and their glances were both pained and reproachful.

"Schools ought to be financed by the town treasury," grumbled Smagin, "and what we merchants need is a Loan Fund."

"I'm not so sure," said Bazunov. "There's something to say for schools, of course, but on the other hand—"

Kulugurov laughed at Matvei.

"Frightened of what'll happen to you after you die?" he said to him. "Thought you'd better pave yourself a road to paradise?"

Tolokonnikov's attitude surprised Kozhemyakin: with a wink he sidled over and whispered mysteriously in his ear:

"You've made a great mistake. Have you forgotten what it says in Ecclesiastes? 'He that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow!' "

And, touching his forehead with his finger, he hurried away as if he had done a good deed.

Revyakin made a vain attempt to focus both eyes on him at once as he muttered:

"Why didn't you give the money to me? I'd have invested it in a great cause. I've found guides—wonderful creatures —unknown and invisible, but all-knowing and all-seeing."

But the attitude of these people to his will was nothing compared with how they felt when they discovered that he had invested all his capital in Sukhobayev's business.

"You're an idiot, that's clear, and not even a pious one," declared Smagin curtly, his flabby cheeks shaking like jelly, and Kozhemyakin could see this was the general opinion.

The only one who defended him was Khryapov, who, wiping away his copious tears with claw-like hands, cried out in front of everybody:

"You did the right thing, Kozhemyakin!"

Soon Kozhemyakin noticed that people seemed to have grown tired of treating him with sarcasm and hostility; that they had, in fact, lost all interest in him. They no longer invited him to their houses and no one but Sukhobayev ever came to see him. They even bowed to him in passing with reluctant condescension, as if doing him a favour.

At first this depressed and angered him, but one day he thought to himself:

Why is it that I take to all the worthless nobodies like Nikon, Tiunov and Drozdov, who attach themselves to me, and I can't manage to like the businessmen of the town, not even Sukhobayev? I've been moving in their set for almost four years now, and what but a feeling of bitterness has it brought me?

And suddenly everything began revolving in the opposite direction, drawing him into the vortex of events of an entirely different kind.

Nikon Maklakov stopped coming to see him so often; indeed, he would not put in an appearance for a week or two at a time. Kozhemyakin heard that he had taken to drink, and every time he met him he noticed that he was ageing rapidly. The bald spots at his temples were making deep inroads into his curly hair, the wrinkles at the corners

of his eyes were deepening, and his gaiety, though more boisterous than ever, seemed forced.

One day he said to Kozhemyakin:

"Pyotr Posulov's a decent chap; he's got a good heart. I met him the other day. I was sitting in the tap-room of *The Lisbon* singing 'The Greening Gardens' and when I finished, a man sitting in the corner got up and stood looking at me with his face all shining—you know, the look of a music-lover—and then he comes over to me like a blind man, stumbling against tables and people, his eyes full of tears, and seizes my hand. 'Thank you,' he says, 'I've never heard that song sung like that before.' I'm not much of a singer as you know—my singing's more like reciting. But that brought us together. He sang in the church choir when he was a boy and when he came here he was assistant choir-master. He's acted in the theatre, too, and loves it. In a word, he's been about."

Nikon bent his head and gave a little laugh as he scratched the back of his neck.

"I became as infatuated with him as if he was a girl. He had no work and nowhere to live. All his father's property had been sold for debts—Sukhobayev bought it. So I found a place for him."

"Where?" asked Kozhemyakin.

"At Masha's. Working in their shop."

There was a pause.

"Aren't you afraid?" asked Kozhemyakin.

Nikon sang a little couplet in reply:

However you fear it, try not to come near it,
There's no escaping love!

"A silly song," he laughed. "One of the latest. Zosima taught it to me."

"What's he doing?"

"Drinking. He seems to have had a dream. Keeps talking about mysterious people, about a carpenter who knows

the secret of all things, so that even the German tsar is afraid of him. Pass me the vodka."

"And Masha?"

"Masha?" repeated Nikon, falling into a reverie.

After this he did not return for some time, then came once or twice in a drunken state. He whistled and shouted and wandered about the house with a bewildered look in his eyes, and behind his levity Kozhemyakin caught the wry smile of a bitter, irrepressible longing. At last one Sunday he came to see him rowdily drunk and accompanied by a good-looking young man in his early twenties wearing a fashionable black suit. As the young man held out his hand he clicked his heels together in an amusing way and said in a splendid deep voice:

"My name's Pyotr Alexeyevich Posulov."

"Looks like his father, doesn't he?" cried Nikon.

Posulov was fair-complexioned. There was something feminine in the soft shy glance of his large eyes and the self-conscious smile of his red lips. Before sitting down he asked permission.

"Tell him what we've come for, Pyotr," said Nikon, tossing back his thinning hair.

And Posulov began persuasively:

"We've come to you with a pressing request, Matvei Savelyevich: help us to start a choir for the cathedral."

Kozhemyakin smiled as he listened to him, nodded his head and promised his assistance.

I might have had such a son, he thought enviously.

When young Posulov had gone he turned to Nikon with a sigh.

"A fine young chap," he said.

"Yes, isn't he?"

"Young and pure. A fine chap."

Nikon went over to him and bent down.

"But I've lost Masha," he said in a flat voice.

"To him?"

"Of course."

He took a seat facing Kozhemyakin and told him the whole story; told it slowly and reminiscently, as if recalling something from the dim past:

"When I took him to her house the first time I could tell by her eyes and her mocking tone I was playing the fool. She let me know it. Later she said to me, 'Aren't you afraid?' 'No,' I said. 'And won't you be sorry?' How could I admit I was afraid and would be sorry? That made her angry. 'You never really loved me,' she said. She was lying, of course; just trying to excuse herself."

He stopped speaking, swallowed a glass of vodka, sniffed at a bit of bread and rolled it into a ball. Through the open window came the warm and fragrant breath of the orchard; leaves were rustling, birds were singing. Nikon got up, tossed the ball of bread through the window and made for the door.

"Good-bye," he said.

Kozhemyakin saw him to the gate. Clouds were spread out across the sky like a flock of enormous birds; for a moment a pale sun glanced down between their wings at the dry, dusty earth, then hid its face. Shadows dragged themselves across the earth, scaling the roofs of houses and wrapping themselves round the trees, robbing the green and gold leaves of their lustre. Some carpenters were singing a song as they lifted a beam, and the melody was as slow and dark as the shadows. A drunken tailor named Barabanov came staggering down the street, banging the fence with his fist, his eyes fixed on the ground, muttering to himself:

"No? Very well, so it's no."

A young cock that had just scrambled out from under a fence darted under the drunkard's feet flapping its wings. He stopped, holding on to the fence with one hand, lifted one leg, and let out a shrill whistle.

Kozhemyakin dropped his head and went back into the yard.

Once more his house became a centre of activity. Twice a week little boys, ragged and barefoot, came running into the yard with a joyful air, as if they had just conquered a great enemy. Shy little girls walked in sedately and planted themselves in corners, where they squealed like little puppies, eager and yet afraid to attract attention. The tenors were for the most part gay and foppish, one of them even carried a walking-stick and wore a ring on the curved little finger of his left hand. Basses with big mouths and long beards lined themselves up in the shade of the barn and cleared their throats impressively. Among this motley crowd the gentle Posulov fluttered like a pigeon. Waving his violin, he would cry:

"Attention, please! Just a minute!"

He drew notes on the barn door and pointed to them with his bow.

"What is the name of this one?" he would ask.

The violin led the way; a consumptive lad with his coat buttoned up to his chin and a scar cleaving one cheek from ear to mouth, sang in a fine tenor voice; the clear soprano of Lyuba Matushkina soared gaily; Yakovlev, a chemist's assistant, sang in a baritone, holding his chin with one hand. And suddenly Makhalov, the smith, a man with eyes like an ox's, opened wide his big black mouth and let out an "O-o-o!" that drowned out all other sounds—the violin, the singers and the murmur of the people who had congregated outside the gate. Posulov put his fingers in his ears and leaped about as if stung; it was very funny to see him with his face screwed up and his violin sticking out of one ear, his bow out of the other. Everyone burst out laughing, rocking to and fro and gesticulating, and the smith, holding his hand over his mouth, roared between his fingers:

"Let out too much steam again?"

Kozhemyakin watched them from behind the potted plants on the window-sill, smiling and joining in softly if

the song was one he knew. From the yard a certain sadness came wafting into his soul.

Occasionally a sharp eye would detect him sitting there and then the children would whisper to one another:

"Look, there he is."

"Where?"

"Over there."

Kozhemyakin would withdraw, thinking to himself:

That's the way they talk about goblins.

Shakir, old and silent, would be sure to have found an inconspicuous retreat where he could listen undisturbed, his eyes narrowed and a gentle smile on his face, and near him would be the tipsy, bedraggled Nikon, who also wore a flickering smile on his red and haggard face.

"Still drinking, Nikon?" Kozhemyakin once said to him reprovingly.

"Still drinking, brother."

"Why do you do it?"

"When a man's drunk he trusts everybody," said Nikon with an odd catch in his voice. "A drunkard's sure of everything—the devils are green and people are good. Can you find a good man when you're sober? Not for love nor money. But I can find one for you easily—there he is!"

And he pointed to Posulov.

Masha took her husband to the asylum in Vorgorod and came back looking thin and dejected, her eyes bigger and darker than ever and her lips dry and drawn into a hard, tight line. She talked less, but she seemed more restless and there was a cautious uncertainty in her walk, as if she were walking along a ledge.

One evening she dressed herself carefully and went to see Kozhemyakin. As they were having tea in the orchard she suddenly said:

"I want to talk to you, Matvei Savelyevich. I'm sick to death of the bestial, senseless life I live; perhaps it's because I'm getting old, or perhaps it's because I have no children,

but sometimes I feel like putting an end to everything."

Kozhemyakin tried to think of something comforting to say to her, but he found that his heart and head were cold and dark.

"Can't you say something?" he heard her demanding. He pulled himself together and rubbed his chest.

"I'm afraid you ought to change your ways," he murmured quickly. "You ought to choose between those two."

She got up and went to stand under one of the trees.

"So Nikon has complained to you, has he?" she asked.

"He told me."

"That I want that other—that Pyotr?"

"Yes."

"He's a fool," she said softly and without malice, breaking off a birch twig and fanning herself with it.

"If only there were children—if only I had one child of his! But he's burning himself up with vodka, the wretch!"

Kozhemyakin waited with strained attention for words to come to him that he might speak to this woman whom he had been so fond of and anxious about. But again he felt—could almost see—his own emptiness.

"I'm dying from my head down," he thought in horror.

"What's the matter?" asked Masha, coming over and peering into his face.

"Nothing special," he replied, feeling ashamed. "I—I don't know—"

Sighing, she walked slowly away.

"It's clear no help can be got from you men," he heard her say; then: "Oh, God!"

She wandered about the orchard a little and went away without saying good-bye. Kozhemyakin sat on for a long time, scrutinizing himself as in a looking-glass and growing more and more afraid.

The shadows thickened as evening advanced, turning into the darkness of night; a faint murmur came from the trees,

the stars floated in a black sky on which the Milky Way was a pale smear, and in the convent garden somebody was chopping wood and grunting, reminding Kozhemyakin of Posulov's father. Dew fell, the air grew damp and the chill of autumn penetrated his heart. He tried to concentrate his thoughts on something serene and harmless, something outside himself, which would not inspire fear.

The owls don't hoot any more now that Sukhobayev is draining the swamp. They must have flown away.

The gate into the orchard was opened and he could hear feet scraping over the ground.

Out of the darkness rose the lean, bent form of the Tatar.

"Is that you, Shakir?"

"Yes. Why are you not asleep?"

"And what about you?"

Ignoring his question, the Tatar came up to the table and stood with his belly pressed against one corner of it.

"You must sleep," he said.

"Plenty of time for that," replied Kozhemyakin thoughtfully. "There's no hurry."

Shakir drew a deep sigh, turned and went away.

"You ought to have yourself christened, you'll be dying soon," said Kozhemyakin. "They'd give you a Russian name. It's high time you and I were thinking about the real things of life."

Without answering, the Tatar vanished in the narrow opening between the dark branches. This was frightening. Kozhemyakin got up, glanced to left and right and quickly made his way from the orchard with his hands stretched out in front of him; every time he touched a branch his heart almost stopped beating.

The thought of death returned to him with increasing frequency after that evening and strove gradually, maliciously, to drive out all other thoughts. At first he accepted it meekly and without protest, though it robbed him of all interest in life and people. And then one day, on catching

sight of himself in the looking-glass, he was shocked by the dazed, morbid expression of his face and the almost guilty look in his eyes. He felt sorry for himself and resentful. He frowned and glanced about as if looking for something with which to tear away the sticky grey cobwebs clinging to his soul. For a while he wandered aimlessly about the house and at last sank wearily into his favourite chair by the window, where he sat gazing blankly at the feathery green wall of foliage and the pale sky above, hoping that something extraordinary would happen to shake him up and drive away his weariness.

Sukhobayev came to see him, shaggy and bristling, in a dusty, crumpled cap smelling of bog water, with a tape-line in his pocket and a long narrow notebook in his hand. He sat down, slapped his knee with the book and hissed through clenched teeth:

"A fine lot, these townsmen! Good for nothing but to put a spoke in the wheel of any decent undertaking. You wouldn't believe how lazy they are, Matvei Savelyevich—and how greedy! How can a man be lazy and greedy at the same time? It's beyond me. This town's more like a den of thieves than a respectable community. Highway robbers ready to fall on the first person they meet and rip the shirt off his back." He leaped up and shook his book over his head in an outburst of feeling. "But I'll show them! They'll not get a chance to suck my blood!" He collapsed into the chair again, shrugged his shoulders and narrowed his piercing eyes: "Where's the sense of it? No sense. I tell them plainly: 'This project will benefit the town as a whole and every citizen in it. You've poisoned the river; we'll purify it. You've got no good drinking-water; we'll give it you.' They won't listen, won't believe what they're told. 'It's just because you'll make a profit out of it,' they say. Idiots, what do they think I'm working for? To make a profit for my ancestors? I say to them: 'Respected fellow-citizens, every year there are fires in our town that cause untold damage

and losses. What we need is to build brick houses.' 'You just say that because you've bought up a lot of clay from the Balymery peasants to start a brick yard.' Well, so I have, and I intend to build a brick yard because somebody's got to build a brick yard, and naturally a thing that we've got to do will bring profit to whoever does it."

Kozhemyakin gave a little laugh. "We've got to die, and who will that bring profit to?"

"Die?" repeated Sukhobayev in astonishment. "Why die? Death's a good long way off yet. First let's have a little taste of life." And, caught up in a new train of thought, he went on with animation: "We've got to try to get the Bubnov mansion for our new school, Matvei Savelyevich. It's in a good position and can be bought for a song. Shall I start negotiating? Very well, I'll begin easy-like."

Sometimes he would sit with half-closed eyes and a smile playing over his lips, giving himself up to his dreams.

"In another ten years you won't recognize this town or the people in it—it'll be as pretty as a picture, upon my word!" And he would run the pointed tip of his tongue over his lips.

He's not afraid of life, mused Kozhemyakin.

Kozhemyakin longed to talk about death, but there was no one to talk to. Every time he broached the subject with Shakir, the Tatar would maintain an obstinate silence or frown and walk away. Foka was incapable of talking about anything at all. Nikon, permanently drunk, did not listen to him, and Posulov was too slight an acquaintance to talk to about such matters.

Posulov always had something new and interesting to tell him.

"Have you ever noticed that skinny tenor with the scar on his cheek, Matvei Savelyevich? He's a foundling. His name's Prachkin and he comes from Petukhov Hill. A tailor by trade. He's got lots of ideas; says we ought to band together against cruelty to human beings." He drew his

chair closer to Kozhemyakin and said in a low, intense voice, his blue eyes shot through with golden light: "We've got to get the people to declare they've had enough of cruelty."

"Who are they to declare it to?"

"To the world in general," replied Posulov, somewhat taken aback. "But especially to those in power. Wouldn't that be fine?" he said with growing confidence. "A declaration of the will of the people: 'We've had enough of ugliness and rudeness. We want to live decently and be happy.' What a difference it'd make!" And he fell to dreaming, a bright smile lighting his face. "A wonderful idea!" he breathed at last.

Kozhemyakin grew increasingly fond of him. The lively glance of his clear blue eyes, his keen interest in life, his eagerness to be doing things and to draw as many people as possible into his activities, made Kozhemyakin take an almost paternal interest in him.

More and more often new ideas cropped up. Like newborn chicks they pecked through the drab shell of Okurov life and hopped away, little yellow balls of fluff, peeping cheerily. They were amusing and the smile they evoked was a kindly one.

Even Nikon felt this. He said one day:

"People seem to be livening up, Matvei Savelyevich—have you noticed it? Their voices have got more body to them and they smile more often. When I say insulting things just for the fun of it, instead of getting angry as they used to do, they just laugh. And yet they all seem to bear a grudge, not against each other, but against somebody else, somebody unseen and unknown."

Kozhemyakin glanced at his sodden face, thinning hair and watery eyes.

"How are you and Masha getting on?" he asked.

"Me and Masha?" The light went out of his eyes. "I don't know. Don't ask me about that; ask her. Or Posulov. They know. I don't. Here, give me something to wet my whistle."

In silence he drank glass after glass of vodka, and when he was completely drunk he flopped down in a corner of the yard. The sombre Foka went over to him, prodded him with the toe of his boot, sighed noisily and walked away with a slow, heavy tread.

Kozhemyakin was incensed. He leaned out of the window to rebuke the porter, but he only gasped and spluttered without uttering a word.

It's them I want to speak to, he thought. I want to tell them they can't let a good man go to the dogs like that.

He put on his coat and cap and went to the market-place, making up a speech as he went about how they must take pity on Nikon, show him kindness and not allow him to wallow in the dirt and drink himself to death.

He found Masha sitting with a book in a cool dark shop stacked from floor to ceiling with haberdashery. When they had exchanged greetings Kozhemyakin instantly began speaking of Nikon in a halting, embarrassed way. A smile flashed in the woman's eyes, then she narrowed them, bit her lip and said firmly:

"Don't talk to me about Nikon. It's none of your business and you don't know what it costs me. You men only know women from the waist down, not from the breast up—the breast she feeds you wretches with. Never will you understand that a husband or a lover can be like a child to her."

He saw that her teeth were clenched, and this frightened and confounded him.

"I didn't mean to say anything I shouldn't," he murmured. "He's a good man and very unhappy."

"He's always been unhappy," she said, pronouncing each word distinctly. "I tried to make him happy. Oh, well, let's not talk about it." But she added with a trace of resentment: "Not to be happy with a woman like me! Why, I shared my very soul with him!"

She wiped her mouth and forehead with her handkerchief

and heaved a sigh that was more like a groan. After a few more uncomfortable minutes, Kozhemyakin took his leave.

That night, roused from sleep by a dreadful sense of loneliness, he lit the lamp and peered into all the dark corners of the room before he took out his notebook and wrote:

"I have been so busy trying to swim against the current that I have not even found time to write in my notebook, and yet all I have managed to do is whirl round and round, without getting anywhere, and now here I am, all alone, cut and bruised by the overhanging banks and submerged rocks, peering into my soul as into a looking-glass, all my life I have tried to understand others but I do not understand myself, I do not see what is the main thing and there is nothing clear and definite that I can say about myself."

He read what he had written and made a wry face:

All false. When did I ever try to swim against the current?

He ruminated a while, turned the page and began once more to pen his neat, well-formed letters:

"Give me thy blessing, oh Lord, that I may confess all without fear or falsehood and without holding anything back.

"As I look at the people about me I see to my sorrow that some, like myself, seek an easy path that will lead them round life and not into it, but that gets them nowhere, they just mark time in one spot until they wear themselves out and die without having brought benefit to themselves or anyone else. Other people, on the contrary, make straight for what they want, undergoing great suffering for the sake of it, but whether they ever get it or not no one can say."

No good. No good at all. These aren't my real thoughts, he said to himself, and, putting down his pen, sat for some

time staring blankly at the stars twinkling above the black trees of the orchard. The hushed sounds of night came floating in at the window and the leaves of the plants on the window-sill stirred gently.

He opened a book he had borrowed from Posulov and stared with distrust at the even lines of print:

"They all promised to cling to one another, to help one another at all times, to rescue one another from danger, to sacrifice their lives for one another if necessary and to avenge the death of any of their number."

Kozhemyakin drew the lamp nearer without taking his eyes off the book.

"So sacred was this vow that a father would take vengeance on his own son to fulfil the demands of the blood-contract made with the brotherhood."

He closed the book for a second, then reopened it cautiously at the first page, put his elbows on the table and began to read. He read as long as his eyes could see, and when at last he raised his head he discovered that the room was light and the trees in the orchard had thrown off the heavy robes of night.

Surprised, he got up and walked about the room, smiling to himself and shaking his weary head.

So that's what books are for, he thought. So that you don't notice the passage of time.

Snatches of what he had read floated through his mind like clouds, changing colour and shape, merging, separating, vanishing. He made no effort to hold on to them, so astonished was he by the magic force that could make him forget himself so utterly.

A little later he undressed, lay down and fell fast asleep.

Next morning, as he was washing himself in the kitchen, he said to Shakir:

"Tell anyone who asks for me that I'm not at home."

"Even Nikon?"

Kozhemyakin considered.

"Yes, even Nikon. Anyone at all. I shall be very busy."

After breakfast he seated himself by the window and opened the book again.

Reading came to be essential to him. It was as if he had been going down a long pathway through open fields and had been stared at from all sides by hostile eyes which seemed to be demanding something of him; he longed to hide from them but there was nowhere to hide; and now he had found a sequestered niche from which he could not get so much as a glimpse of the irritating life around him, a niche in which he could live without noticing the dull monotonous passage of time. He read slowly, going again and again over the lines that pleased him most, and whenever he approached the end of a book he would anxiously finger the diminishing pages that remained.

He went out less than ever, and when Posulov's choir gathered in his house and practised the Doxology again and again, Kozhemyakin would frown and say to himself:

How long are they going to keep that up?

He read the works of Kostomarov, the story of the Pugachov revolt, Pushkin's *Captain's Daughter* and *Boris Godunov*, but not his poetry.

"That's for children, I have no need of poetry. I want some more history," he said to Posulov.

"There is no more history."

"What do you mean?" asked the startled and incredulous Kozhemyakin.

"I haven't got any more books on history."

"Then get some. When you go to Vorgorod for goods I'll give you some money to buy books. Serious ones. Ask somebody what to buy."

So accustomed had he become to reading that he could not get through a day without it, and if he had no new book he would reread old ones. Amazed by the strength of his passion he said to himself:

Fancy that! I used to look down on people who had a passion for cards and other things, but look at me now.

Soon after this Nikon Maklakov died. One night in a drunken state he climbed to the top of the fire-tower, and when they tried to force him to come back he resisted, fell down the stairs and struck his head.

Kozhemyakin was not surprised that he should come to such an end; on the contrary, he had always been sure that something of the sort would happen to him. He was almost relieved when it did: Nikon was done for and Kozhemyakin did not have to worry about him any more. But he was deeply affected by the funeral.

It was a quiet funeral, but attended by a great many people. In the procession behind the coffin were many poor folk from the artisans' settlement as well as from the town. Sukhobayev was there in a black suit, and Masha, grave and sombre, with a kerchief pulled down low over her eyes, and Smagin, blue with asthma, and other of the town's leading citizens.

Sukhobayev shook his smooth head as he said to Kozhemyakin:

"This isn't the first time a man talented by birth and honest by nature has found life too much for him and taken to evil ways—a thing I shouldn't say of the dead. How can it be explained? It's very deep."

The warm dust of the road crept into Kozhemyakin's nose and throat, and terrifying thoughts seeped into his mind.

"We don't know anything," he murmured, his eyes on the ground.

Between the shoulders of the people in front of him he caught a glimpse of the coffin and the waxen nose of Nikon sticking up in the air. Masha walked to the side, sighing and crossing herself. Sukhobayev glanced at her and said under his breath:

"Strange things do go on."

After the funeral Semyon Maklakov, bowing apologetically, invited people to the funeral feast. To Kozhemyakin he said, slapping himself on the thigh with his cap and darting glances from side to side:

"You were his friend, do come and have some pancakes."

Beggars wandered among the crowd, holding out dirty palms, wriggling their fingers like fat worms and pleading in nasal voices that stuck to the ear like fly-paper.

We're all beggars in this world, thought Kozhemyakin as, almost unconsciously, he dropped kopeks into their hands.

He did not go to the funeral feast and regretted it when he got home. He was plunged in a black mood that no reading could dispel. Somehow he managed to pass the day, and in the evening he went to see Sukhobayev. He found him sitting in his front garden reading the Bible. They entered upon one of those easily forgotten discussions that stir the soul by posing insoluble problems.

"Look," said the scrubbed and polished Sukhobayev, pointing to the large letters, "here it's put very plainly."

And he raised a warning finger threateningly as he read in a loud and distinct voice:

"Except ye turn, and become as little children, ye shall in no wise enter into the Kingdom of Heaven."

He slammed the book shut.

"I keep arguing with Posulov; he keeps telling people they must band together against cruelty and says the Bible's the one and only law for all time. That's true, of course, but then—"

He glanced round and lowered his voice.

"—but there's plenty of cruelty in the Bible: fire and brimstone and the like. In the first place, Matvei Savelyevich, how is one to accept life 'as a little child,' tell me that. There's scarcely a thing happens but what a man wants to protest, and once he protests, where's your 'little child'? If you don't stand up for yourself in this life you'll always go about with a bloody nose."

He jumped up, walked past Kozhemyakin and sat down again.

"As soon as a man begins thinking the least little bit he runs into pins and prickles and can't move a finger. Perhaps the best thing is just to shut your eyes and do what you like, and when it's all over let whoever wants to decide whether you behaved as a little child or not. Any other way just leads to filth and savagery and that's the truth. Don't forget it's also written that if the tree bears no fruit, it shall be cut down and cast into the fire. There's your fire and brimstone for you!"

"I never dreamed you thought about such things," said Kozhemyakin in surprise.

Sukhobayev shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm a human being, aren't I?" he said. "Of course I think about them. I've got a sharp eye and a quick brain. I'd like to do some good in this world and not have people think ill of me; I'd like to win their esteem. Even the saints wanted to be well thought-of; it's our thinking well of them that makes them saints."

"We're threatened on all sides," said Kozhemyakin with a deep sigh.

Already he was tired of talking to Sukhobayev; what he said drew a tight ring of oppressive thoughts around him.

"By whom?" asked his host aggressively. "Isn't it by our own selves? And the Lord God calling down to us: 'Be like little children.' But how's a man to be as a little child when everybody looks upon him as a rascal?"

Kozhemyakin evaded the issue by asking wearily:

"When do you expect to finish that building you're putting up in the market-place?"

Sukhobayev darted a sharp glance at him, then drew himself up and launched on an account of his numerous undertakings.

I should never have gone to see him, thought Kozhemyakin as he walked back along the street through the shadows

cast by the moon. I'm an old man, I've lived half a century, why should I bother my head with such things? All I want is peace. I've tried hard to find a place where I fit. Enough of it! Of course if a person's got sufficient faith, one word from him can wither a fig-tree, but if he hasn't got this faith, build as many buildings as you like and still you'll find no peace.

He walked as usual, hugging walls and fences, brushing them now with his shoulder, now with his elbow; from time to time a black shadow would spring up in front of him and bounce over the ground, dragging him along behind it, and as he watched its movements he sighed and said to himself:

So now Nikon's dead. And Shakir will soon be following him; he's half-dead already.

When Posulov returned and brought him a big box of new books he was overjoyed. He instantly cut the pages of all of them and arranged them in two high stacks on the floor beside his desk; from them he selected Solovyov's *History*, put it on his desk, opened it at the first page and walked up and down in front of it for some time, postponing the pleasure of beginning.

Soon he was again reading all day long; reading until his eyes ached, jealously guarding his solitude, going nowhere, taking no interest in anything, hardly bothering to glance at the hands of the clock that noted the passage of time on the yellow fly-spotted face.

The grey pages of the thick volume told of events in a heavy, unimpassioned tongue, saying little of people; human speech was not heard, human faces were not seen; from time to time the dead murmured complaints that did not touch the heart, chilled as it was by the unfeeling language of the book.

Kozhemyakin dug into the pages as a bird digs into a snowbank in winter, but he was more disinterested than the bird, for while the latter seeks food, he sought nothing but to lose himself. He got impressions of warring rulers, of

human greed and ambition, quarrels and battles, theft and cruelty, dishonour and deception. There was something familiar in the dark and bloody confusion of it all and it evoked a cheerless yet consoling thought:

People have always lived just as they live now.

While reading he felt as if he were half-asleep, seeing visions that soothed his soul by telling the monotonous tale of man's futile attempt to overcome life's misery. Sometimes he would get up and pace the floor, mentally refuting the theories of Mark Vasilyevich, Yevgenia and other foolish people.

It's childish to suppose that life can be changed. How could it be? There's nothing that could possibly change it—not even spending forty years in the wilderness. Wilderness, indeed! It's the very essence of things, the very roots that are rotten.

When he was away from a book, its influence remained with him. He saw reality through the dust of centuries and built up a barricade of book-lore to hold off disturbing thoughts.

And yet life would not let him go, and strange indeed were the forms in which it pressed itself upon him.

One day after choir practice, young curly-haired Lyuba Matushkina came to see him, looking as pretty as a picture even though she was wearing patched boots and a dress that was too long for her.

"May I speak to you?"

She asked it so solemnly that the old man laughed in spite of himself and invited her to sit down. She came gliding across the floor, smiling and looking at him with clear blue eyes, and she asked something of him, but he was too taken aback by her courage and appearance to grasp what it was. He merely blinked his tired eyes and said:

"Yes, of course."

She disappeared at once, leaving him with mixed feelings: he did not exactly like her but he felt sorry for her.

As lively as a boy, he thought. Poor little motherless child; seems to have a hard life; look how she's dressed, in old clothes that belonged to her mother. And soon she'll be of a marriageable age.

She came back the next day, and at her heels, as if on a leash, came the consumptive tenor, his shoulders hunched, his head drooping. His face, distorted by the deep, ugly scar, was quivering, his lips were twisted and his dark eyes, half closed, darted here and there, but avoided Kozhemyakin. He halted in the middle of the room and stood there, as still as a post, twirling his cap so fast that it was impossible to detect its form or colour.

"Here we are," said Lyuba, tossing back her curls and going straight up to Matvei Savelyevich. "Speak up, Prachkin."

Her companion took a step forward and opened his dark eyes.

Eyes like those of St. Panteleimon the Healer, thought Kozhemyakin.

The young man plunged the hand with the cap into his coat pocket and began speaking with an air of assurance.

"My intentions are simple enough," he said. "Anyone who perceives that life is not what it ought to be is in duty bound to communicate this to others and ought to begin with children. For that reason I wish to become a teacher and I have come to ask you to help me. I am prepared to take the examinations but I need a little money to help me over the first period."

"I see," said Kozhemyakin, glad that it was such a simple request and that the young man would soon go away.

"Why do you think life is not what it ought to be?" he asked out of politeness.

Prachkin came closer and answered precisely:

"Because of cruelty and hard-heartedness, and this must be made plain. Cruelty comes from being afraid of your

neighbour, and being afraid of your neighbour comes from cruelty, and there you are—a vicious circle. Therefore it's necessary that some people should refuse to be cruel and in this way break the vicious circle. That's what we've got to teach children."

Kozhemyakin blinked in astonishment and glanced from him to the girl who was sitting with parted lips, her elbows propped on her knees. Both of them were so young, and yet they had thought of this extraordinary thing.

"Mm," he murmured. "So that's it. Not bad."

Prachkin gave a nervous little laugh, drew a deep breath and added:

"It's a loan I am asking for, of course."

When they were gone Kozhemyakin paced the floor, feeling a certain antipathy for them.

Bah! he said to himself, pulling at his beard. Another one of your Prince Galitskys! Breaking vicious circles and suchlike. It's taken centuries to forge them, those circles, and along comes a young whippersnapper like him—and the girl, too; she has nobody to look after her, she'll be getting herself in trouble with such fellows if she's not careful.

He gave Prachkin the money and forgot all about him, but Lyuba Matushkina kept flickering through his mind like a moth, smiling at him, nodding her head invitingly and holding out her hands with their long delicate fingers; this disturbed him and excited unwanted thoughts. One day she asked him for some books. He gave them to her reluctantly, and from that time on the relations between them were odd and undefined. She would look at him with laughing eyes as if expecting something of him, and this annoyed him.

"They're dull, serious books, not for a child like you," he would grumble.

"They're not dull at all."

"You won't understand them."

"Oh, yes, I will. I've already read the whole of Mamma's Turgenev," she announced with pride and joy.

He shook his head, not believing her, and said no more on the subject. An enigmatic smile glinted in her blue eyes, reminding him disconcertingly of Yevgenia's sly and knowing smile. The girl had an elusive charm. She was interesting and had a way of suddenly becoming grave and grown-up, when she would display a knowledge beyond her years and make him listen to her in spite of himself. Very simply and trustfully, often embarrassing him with details, she would tell him about her father and the officials who were his friends, about their drinking and gambling, and about herself and her dreams. Her stories, vaguely reminding him of his own youth, sometimes let a thin, sad ray of light into the darkness of his soul, warming his heart.

"Why don't you read the newspaper?" she once asked him.

"Why in the world should I read the newspaper?" he asked.

"To find out what's going on."

He shrugged his shoulders and looked at her pretty face, pitying her.

"Well, what is going on?" he asked.

In her quick way of speaking she told him about the mysterious murder of an actress by an officer, about some fishermen who had been carried out to sea on an ice-floe and then about some dramatic love entanglement.

"You have no business knowing such things," he said.

She pouted comically.

"Ugh! You're just like Papa!"

Before he knew it he had become used to her visits. He would grow anxious if she did not appear for three or four days. He knew she lived a defenceless sort of existence among the drunken gamblers who were her father's companions. But if she came too often he was equally worried.

"She's growing up," he said to himself. "The neighbours may gossip."

A red sun pierced the foliage of the orchard, sending sharp rays of sunlight through the open window. The entire room was gilded and decorated with patches of living light, a gentle wind rocked the branches, making the patches quiver and merge, vanish and reappear, flowing in molten gold over walls and floor.

Kozhemyakin sat inertly in the profound stillness of the room, trying to think of something that would cheer him, but always the same picture kept rising to his mind: he was walking at night among shaggy, sterile hills; all about him lay the dark, lifeless wilderness; stars were twinkling in a murky sky; the sweep of the Milky Way glimmered hazily; far ahead of him the town lay stretched upon the earth as if crucified, and from every side came the voice of an invisible omnipresent creature crying:

"Help! Oh, take pity!"

The vision made a lump rise in his throat and hot tears spring to his eyes. He wanted to cry out.

It grew dark and cold. He closed the window and lit the lamp and, still holding it in his hand, sat down at his desk. A line from the yellow page of an open book caught his eye: "... speak ever gently, never harshly."

It took possession of his mind, crowding out everything else. To drive it away he opened a drawer of the desk, took out his notebooks and began leafing through them.

What are they for? Who wants them? Yevgenia will never see them. They'll be thrown in the stove when I die. People may even laugh at them. Perhaps I should give them to Lyuba?

He dropped his head upon the desk and wept the bitter tears of an old man; they fell upon the page, little drops like those that drip off the roof in March, and made the letters run and form blots with dainty purple edges.

He shook the drops off on to the floor, shut his eyes and sat motionless for a long time, crushed and helpless.

The whole following day was spent in this dejected mood, and towards evening Lyuba came with a book in her hand.

"Hullo!"

There she stood, fair, slender and graceful; she pulled the kerchief off her head and her curly hair fell about her forehead and cheeks and over her laughing eyes. Tossing the book on a chair she swept back the recalcitrant curls with long fingers, pushing them behind her little pink ears. She looked remarkably like her mother at that moment, just as doll-like, and the resemblance was enhanced by the old worn dress that Kozhemyakin thought he had seen before.

"So here you are, my dear," he said, addressing her with a term of endearment for the first time.

She put her hands on her narrow hips, leaned backward in a way that emphasized her budding breasts and took a few steps about the room.

"Oh, how tired I am!" she exclaimed. Glancing at him, she suddenly asked in a matter-of-fact tone, "Why are you like that?"

"Like what?"

"So pale, and with your hair uncombed."

"Oh, I don't know—"

She sat down beside him and looked into his eyes.

"Oh, what a long face! I've just dropped in for a minute. Lusha and I have been cleaning all day long. It's been awful! Papa's friends played cards at our house until six o'clock in the morning. And ate. Got drunk, of course—dirt and cigarette ends simply everywhere! It makes me sick to think of it. Papa lost money at the postmaster's on Saturday and invited them all to our house last night and lost again and got drunk in despair and today he's a sight: cross and a headache and finds fault with everything and

keeps complaining I don't love him, and there am I with the floors to scrub. I told him to go to bed until the house was in order and that would be time enough to talk about love. I'm very severe with him at times, you know."

Kozhemyakin looked at her angular shoulders, long arms and beautiful hands. And at her face: her eyes were shining indulgently and her full lips were curved in a kindly smile.

"It's hard for you to be with such people, isn't it?"

Her nostrils quivered, she drew her brows into a straight line and narrowed her eyes.

"Ye-es," she said after a little pause. "But I go away if they start talking nonsense and get familiar."

She gave a little laugh and blushed to the ears.

"They're always lying; the things they say don't really happen. I'd know if they did because Mamma told me everything—about people and about women—everything. They just say them out of spite."

"To spite whom?" he asked without looking at her.

"I don't know," she answered thoughtfully. "Perhaps it's not out of spite but just because they have nothing better to do. They never do anything but drink and play cards and that must be terribly tedious; I suppose they just have to talk about something else sometimes. They're horrible bores. And you, too, today—"

"Me?" said Kozhemyakin softly. "I'm thinking about death. I'll soon be dying."

She lowered her eyelids and said tenderly:

"You poor thing! It's such fun to live! I intend to live ever so long."

She went over to the window and sat on the sill, leaning out.

Kozhemyakin dropped his head and rocked silently to and fro, patting his knees. The orchard was enveloped in the blue shadows of evening, which greyed the green of the foliage. A yellow moon hung in a cloudless sky, mos-

quitoes were buzzing, and Lyuba said as she waved them off:

"I don't feel like going home, I'd rather sit here with you and have tea and—and—just sit; it's so nice and quiet and clean here. I really am terribly tired; all my bones ache."

"Do stay," said Kozhemyakin softly.

"I must go home for supper. Papa will scold if I'm late."

She tapped one heel against the wall and explained in some embarrassment:

"Sometimes I find it so hard that I simply don't know what to do; I even hide away in a corner and cry, can you believe it? If only there was some way of whipping up time and making it go faster so that I would soon be grown-up!" She laughed. "That's a silly thing to say." A leaf of the rubber plant tickled her neck; she bent her head and pushed it away with one cheek. "But it's fun to say silly things. And to sit on the window-sill, though it's supposed to be ill-bred. If I had a house of my own I'd make one whole wall of glass so that I could see everything. Are you fond of the town? I am, awfully. It's so sweet and silly, like a toy. If you look at it from the fields the houses are like mushrooms shaken out of a basket on to the grass."

She laughed at her simile and raised her hands to push back her curls again, looking very airy and transparent.

"Wormy mushrooms," put in Kozhemyakin. He often made such remarks to see how she would react, but she always ignored them. It was pleasant to be with her; the simple things she said drove away his gloom as moonlight dissolves shadow.

"Well, I must be going," she said, springing off the window-sill.

"Do you love your father?" he asked with a sigh, also getting up.

"I love him, of course," she said hesitantly; then, lower-

ing her tone and turning pale: "But not altogether. He was very unkind to Mamma."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Mamma explained to me but I didn't quite understand. It seems he loved her awfully but didn't trust her and was always imagining things. Isn't that dreadful? He even subscribed to the worst possible newspapers and books just to spite her."

"How could he spite her by subscribing to newspapers?"

She threw back her head and frowned.

"If the things in them were horrid and false?" she asked gravely.

"Who knows what is false and what is true?" he ventured.

"It's very simple: the good is true and the bad is false," she said conclusively. Her brows formed a straight line, her lips shut tightly and she looked stern and obstinate instead of like a bright, brave, inquisitive little squirrel.

When she had gone his mind clung desperately to her; he deliberately fastened it upon her by thinking:

How does the child live? I can't make out whether she's older or younger than her years. Sometimes she seems older, sometimes younger.

He was touched by her truthfulness, her roguishness and the clear glance of her gentle eyes. He seemed to hear her bright, velvety laugh. She hardly opened her mouth when she laughed, giving only the least glimpse of her even white teeth, her ears would grow pink, she would toss her head and raise her hands to push back the fair curls that came tumbling about her face. At such moments the old man noticed her swelling bosom and thought to himself:

She'll be wanting a husband soon.

He never went anywhere, but sometimes Sukhobayev came to see him. Sukhobayev was now mayor of the town and went whirling like a top through his ever accumulating

affairs. He was thinner and sharper than ever and breathed raucously through the dilated nostrils of his bony nose. No longer did he complain of people, but spoke of them in lowered tones, frequently wetting his lips. Kozhemyakin recoiled from the hard things he said.

"Ours is a herdsman's task: if the cattle don't mind when you shout at them you've got to give them a touch of the whip."

Lyuba became the main link attaching him to the life of the town. She knew everything that went on; all the gossip, all the intentions of the townsfolk, and whatever she said was like a spring of pure water bubbling up in a dirty stream; the spring had found its course and flowed quietly past the dirt, untainted by it.

Sometimes they discussed books they had read, and Kozhemyakin was surprised to hear Lyuba speak with equal admiration of heroes and villains.

"How can you say that?" he once asked. "Where's that broad line you once drew between the good and the bad?"

She laughed.

"That's how it seems to me somehow, I don't know why."

She fell to thinking and he teased her gently, very much pleased with himself for some reason.

And then she said one day, smiling as if asking forgiveness:

"But what happens in the book is all over and done with and there's nothing left of it but the tale, and when I read the tale I love everybody alike: the witch and the good fairy and the ogre and Ivan."

Her eyes grew round as if something had just dawned on her and she burst out laughing.

"But of course! There wouldn't be any tale if there wasn't any witch."

Another time he said to her:

"I suppose you've begun thinking about getting married?"

"No," she said, shaking her head; but the next moment she blushed, dropped her eyes and added: "That is, I do think about it, of course. But just to get married, without feeling anything—that would be doing what everybody else does, and I don't want to do that. I think it's horrid. Vanya Khryapov expects me to marry him—"

"Is he a good sort?"

"Vanya? Ye-es," she said uncertainly. "He's all right, only he's lazy; doesn't want to do anything. Keeps talking about war—wants to join the army as a volunteer and wants me to become a nurse. But I don't like war. His grandfather's a darling."

"His grandfather!" snorted Kozhemyakin, instantly jealous. "There's not a person in the town who hasn't groaned because of that grandfather of his, the old skinflint!"

"And yet he's a good person at heart," asserted Lyuba placidly.

The old man maintained a sulky silence.

More than once as he had stood on an autumn evening gazing at the red clouds presaging the cold, the storms and the loneliness of winter, he had thought to himself:

I wonder if I haven't been in too much of a hurry to will my property to the town; I might find a young wife to leave it to. And perhaps have a son. Life isn't worth living this way. Not a soul even to shut my eyes for me when I'm dead. I could change my will, of course—

But one glance in the looking-glass was enough to chase such thoughts out of his mind. His heart sank and the fear of death rose like a cloud in his mind, freezing it, making his bones ache and his thinning grey hair stir.

Then the tall, slender girl would come to see him again. She would tell him excitedly what was going on in the world, and end by stamping her foot and saying impatiently:

"But why don't you subscribe to a good newspaper? You really ought to. Please do."

He gave in to her demand, but only on condition that she herself should come every day and read it to him.

And here she is reading to him in quick, clear tones from the vociferous page, and as Kozhemyakin listens he fancies what he hears was written by Mark Vasilyevich or Yevgenia or the biting Senya Komarovsky. They are their thoughts and words, and Lyuba accepts them all without question.

"Why do you swallow everything you read?" he once asked her querulously.

"Because it's true; anybody can see that."

Sometimes she would walk up and down the room with tears in her eyes, waving the crumpled sheet, and with sinking heart he would hear her uttering words that were an echo of his own long-forgotten thoughts:

"Why is it that people here are so out of everything, so lost and abandoned? Look, there are people who want to make things better, who write such fine, true things. But we never hear anything like that in this town. People here don't understand anything. Is it really because our generals are Germans that we're losing the war? Nothing of the sort. And yet Papa keeps saying that if Skobelev—"

She'll go away too, thought Kozhemyakin wretchedly. She's bound to. The old dread rose in his mind. Here am I about to die, but my thoughts want to live.

Gently, cautiously, he tried to persuade her:

"Don't put too much trust in those things. I know only too well how few people there are who want the good and the true. If the good and the true was to put in an appearance here they'd get a cold reception. Nobody even knows what they look like; the townsfolk would be frightened and chase them away. Newcomers! They don't like newcomers. I know what I'm saying, Lyuba." Forgetting her age, he poked an accusing finger at himself and said in warning tones: "Look at me, Lyuba: they appeared to me, the good and the true, and I turned them away. I'm

sick to death of myself, Lyuba; all my life I've been carrying myself about in my arms, and I'm tired of the burden, tired of it, worn out by it, and still I go on carrying myself about. There's nothing ahead of me but death, but it's a pity to die without having seen life—nothing but emptiness and the hope of something better. And when this something came I was afraid and too lazy to go half way to meet it, and so here I am."

She stood in the middle of the room listening to him in astonishment, and when he finished speaking she came up to him and said:

"That's not true."

"Oh, but it is," he exclaimed, and, caught up by a longing to bare his soul, he took her by the hand and sat her down next to him. Picking up one of his notebooks, he opened it and read hurriedly:

"God looks down upon his children and says to Himself, Where am I? My spirit is not to be found in the people of my creating, I am lost and forgotten, my commandments are as sounding brass and my words have lost their living fire—nothing but ashes strewn upon stones, nothing but snow fallen upon waste land."

"Who wrote that, you?" she asked, glancing incredulously from the book to him.

"Yes, me; but that's not all—wait."

In agitation he leafed through the book. He wanted to find something that would shake her convictions and act as a warning, and he wanted something for himself, too. She moved in her chair, seeking a more comfortable pose, and her movement disturbed and inspired him. He caught a new expression in her eyes; one he had never seen before.

"I've written the whole truth in these books."

"About yourself?" she asked quietly.

"About everything."

He began to read and saw that she understood. Her wide eyes were filled with strained attention, her lips moved soundlessly, as if repeating his words, she leaned across his arm to see the page and a strand of her hair fell on his sleeve and stirred gently. When he read to her about Mark Vasilyevich she straightened up with a beaming face and said happily:

"Oh, I've known such people. Mamma told me lots of wonderful things about them and there are even books about them. I'm so glad you've written all this!" Then, lowering her voice: "But Papa, poor thing, doesn't believe it, and that's what killed Mamma, of course. I must go back to him, I'm late as it is. But I'll come back tomorrow directly dinner's over, and you'll read it all to me, won't you?" she said, looking at him imploringly. "All, to the very end."

And she ran out.

On the following day he read to her about Yevgenia and saw that she was touched. He himself almost wept at the sight of her woeful smile and the pity in her eyes.

"It's terribly interesting," she would exclaim from time to time, touching the book timidly and enviously.

And once: "So that's how books are written! What fun it must be to write about people! I, too, intend to write down all the good things I see. How is it you have no picture of Aunt Yevgenia?" Before he could answer, she said: "Would you like me to give you a photo of her and Boris? She sent one to Mamma and I don't need it. Do you want it?"

Kozhemyakin was delighted.

"I remember her very well," she said, gazing into space. "And I write to Boris. Not long ago he sent me his picture. He's a student at the university now—would you like to see it?"

Flushing suddenly and dropping her eyes, she said:

"Did you love her very much?"

"Very much," breathed Kozhemyakin.

"I wouldn't have gone away in her place. And yet—it's hard to say." She looked at him with moist eyes, biting her lip. "Goodness, how interesting!" she breathed. "Just like in Turgenev."

Her agitation touched the old man's heart, releasing the awful pressure that had gathered there. He leaned over his desk and murmured incoherently:

"Ah, Lyuba, my life's been one big mistake."

Frightened, she lifted his head in strong hands.

"You're a darling," she said, smoothing back his grey hair. "I know all the good you've done."

"I've only done it so that people should leave me in peace. Everyone wants to be left in peace, mistaking peace for happiness," he confessed.

When he had found some assuagement for his grief by pouring it out to her, he balanced his manuscripts on the palm of his hand and said:

"When I die, Lyuba, take these books and send them to Boris, will you?"

"I will," she promised from where she stood, white and slender, in the middle of the room.

"And don't forget to bring me the pictures."

"I won't," she said softly.

He longed to ask her about Yevgenia and Boris.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked her.

She looked at him a moment before she came slowly across the room.

"Grandad Khryapov talks the same way about himself," she said.

"Does he?" said Kozhemyakin sceptically.

"Yes. He ought to write about his life, too. If we knew the things people think but never say, everything would be different and better, wouldn't it?"

"I'm not sure."

"I am. I know it would," she said with an air of finality, folding her arms and looking about as if seeing things for the first time. "Before I knew what went on in Papa's mind I was afraid of him, but one day he told me all about himself and now I understand him."

"But you don't understand old Khryapov," muttered Kozhemyakin with a sombre shake of his head, resenting the comparison. "He's a wicked old scamp."

"No, he isn't."

"I've lived beside him all my life."

"So have I," replied the girl. Going over to him with a winning smile, she said: "Please go and see him. I beg you to."

He gave her his promise.

When she was gone he walked up and down with his eyes on the floor as if searching for traces of her steps, his mind taken up with little thoughts that skimmed through it like the fleecy white clouds of spring.

There's not much a man needs to make him happy: just somebody to listen to him attentively and not be in a hurry to judge him.

Cautiously, as if afraid of breaking the trend of his thoughts, he sat down at the desk and began to write. Now he knew who would be reading his entries.

"The greatest blessing of life is that there is always some young heart budding and blossoming near by, and if one peers into it one is sure to find a smile waiting for one. A man who has grown weary and embittered by life would do well to remember this, to seek out the young and tell them honestly all that he has suffered, let them know why it is that a man becomes embittered and what paths are the wrong ones. If the knowledge of age is joined by bonds of friendship to the pure and trustful strength of youth, goodness and kindness will increase."

He put down his pen, shut his eyes and imagined the face of Yevgenia as she read those lines. His heart was sadly serene.

Three days later, on a gloomy September afternoon, he went to see the old money-lender Khryapov. He was met by broad-faced snub-nosed Vanya, who said in the breaking voice of his years:

"Come in; I'll call Grandfather."

Kozhemyakin scrutinized him jealously and was pleased: the lad was not to his liking. Red-cheeked, stocky, wearing a blue blouse with a vest over it and wide trousers tucked inside his high boots, he was, in Kozhemyakin's opinion, coarse and rude—looked like a coachman, in fact. He kept pushing back his curly auburn hair, his brown eyes darted restlessly from place to place, shadows flitted constantly across his face, and he was forever sniffing and snorting. He sat down on one of the trunks, swinging his legs and looking from them to the caller with a disagreeable expression of curiosity.

"Hurry up, Grandad!" His voice cracked as he called, and to cover his embarrassment he rose heavily and lumbered out of the room.

A little door in the corner beside the tile stove was opened, a yellow hand was thrust through, felt tremblingly for the edge of the stove-bunk, clutched it and was followed by old Khryapov, who edged in noiselessly, looking like a wraith in his grey dressing-gown trimmed with black tassels. He staggered across the floor, one hand shading his eyes, the other catching at the edges of furniture and the backs of chairs, his head poked forward, his mouth gaping, giving a glimpse of discoloured fangs.

"Where might you be, neighbour?" he wheezed. "Ah, there you are. I can see your carcass but not your face—only something that looks like a sieve or a basket, begging your pardon."

He reached Kozhemyakin and sat down beside him and

after the usual greetings, leaned on his shoulder and said, chuckling softly:

"So you're weeping and lamenting, are you? Crying over your sins, eh?"

Why should she have told him that? thought Kozhemyakin angrily. Aloud he said: "Who can help crying over the licking we're taking in this war?"

"They're licking us all right!" agreed Khryapov, adding as if in gratitude: "Very conscientiously teaching us a lesson, hm, hm."

Without lowering the hand shielding his eyes he peered into his caller's face. Kozhemyakin turned away.

"We've had about enough of their teaching," he said curtly.

"Don't look like it, the way we keep on fighting. 'Here, brother, swat me again.' But I'm just joking, of course."

Dropping his hand limply on his knee, Khryapov opened his red and watery eyes and, still scrutinizing Kozhemyakin, gave him a poke in the ribs.

"Don't be ashamed. Lyuba has told me what you're weeping over. That's all right. You and I have gone bungling through life, trying this and that, and now here we are, a pair of drivelling old men. But we're not the only ones; the town's full of good-for-nothings like us." He pulled a big coloured handkerchief out of his dressing-gown and wiped his moist face and mouth. "I can't for the life of me stem the tears," he said, his thin lips stretched in a grin. "But I'm not ashamed of them; they're good tears even if they don't do anybody any good. Though perhaps they do Lyuba some good. Perhaps she has need of them, eh? These sour tears of ours make her think people are good at heart. We know they're rascals even when they weep, but there's no reason why she should know it, is there?"

"You're talking nonsense," murmured Kozhemyakin disapprovingly, but Khryapov seemed not to hear him.

"She's setting out to battle for the right. Well, let her think the worst rapscallion can wash his sins away in his tears. Let her think they purify him, although as a matter of fact they're not tears of contrition, not tears shed 'that the doors be opened to me through repentance.' They're tears of fear because it's time we were in our graves; it *is* time, isn't it? And we don't want to be in our graves."

Irritated by his chaffing, Kozhemyakin recoiled.

"I don't know why you should—"

But Khryapov gave him another poke and said in lowered tones:

"I'm just joking. It's not you I have in mind, never fear. I remember all the fine speeches you've made and all the good things you've done; I know all about them. Don't think I have no respect for your tears; no indeed, I'm just joking."

"That's not why I—"

But again Khryapov interrupted him:

"That's not why, and that *is* why—anything's enough to make a man weep," he said, patting his knee.

Once more he leaned upon Kozhemyakin's shoulder, screwing up his eyes so that the tears overflowed, searching Kozhemyakin's face with a filmly, half-blind gaze. His flabby lips quivered and his little tongue darted in and out like a snake's as he whispered:

"How's a man to keep from howling, once the Lord God makes fun of him? Or does He? It's certain the devil pushes him about, here and there, as though he was playing a game of draughts with live humans as his pieces."

"You shouldn't say such things at your age."

"I'm just joking, you fool! But thanks for teaching me what I ought to do," he said, nodding a head that looked as if it had been plucked.

"I'm not teaching you—"

"That grandson of mine is always teaching me. There's a knowing little beast for you! 'You've lived to be a hun-

dred,' says he, 'and what's the result? I'm ashamed to be seen in the street,' says he. There you are! How do you like that?"

He chuckled again as he played with the tassels of his dressing-gown, pulling out threads, rolling them into balls between his fingers and dropping them on the floor.

"Does Vanya really say such things?" asked Kozhemyakin softly, glancing up.

"He does indeed. 'Ashamed to be seen in the street,' he says."

"What's he ashamed of?"

"Of me, his grandad."

Kozhemyakin felt sorry for the old man. He sighed and looked about him. The room was crammed with trunks and chests of drawers. His eye was caught by two china closets filled with silver. There were piles of teaspoons and tablespoons tied together with ribbons and tapes, dozens of silver glass-holders and gilded wine-glasses. On top of the chests of drawers stood candlesticks and candelabra and several samovars, and the entire icon corner was hung with icons in expensive frames. The room was like a second-hand shop.

All these things were given him as security, I suppose, thought Kozhemyakin.

The smell of tobacco and moth-balls choked him and almost made him sneeze.

The old man proceeded in a squeaky voice:

"'Year after year you've been saving up money, Grandad,' says he, 'and what for?' And off he goes, teaching me, teaching me for all he's worth, and I just sit and listen. But sometimes—just as a joke, mind—I have my say. 'You half-baked little simpleton,' I say, 'it's for your sake I squeezed the blood out of people. It was so that you could climb up in the world with your cleanside outside that I laid down in the mud under your baby feet.' 'Did I ask you to?' says he. 'You weren't even born when I first

sullied my soul for your sake,' says I. But he just snorts at me."

Kozhemyakin could hardly believe that Vanya was what his grandfather made him out to be.

"Perhaps Lyuba taught him to be like that," he said.

"Lyuba?" said the old man quickly and shook his head. "Oh, no. I know Lyuba. She was no more than seven years old when she said to me one day: 'Grandad,' she said, 'are you a scamp?' 'That I am, my dear, that I am,' says I—just joking of course, but she climbs up on my knee looking very serious and starts playing with my beard and says: 'Don't be a scamp any more, Grandad, you oughtn't to be, really, and here's the scissors, cut me out another Vasilisa the Fair because Vanya tore the head off my other one.' I used to tell them stories and cut out pictures for them and colour them. She and I have been friends ever since. She always stands up for me, Lyuba does."

His face was wet with tears; they kept streaming from his eyes, which were like gaping wounds. Again he took out his handkerchief and, still talking, wiped his cheeks and patted his eyes. It was odd to see this decrepit old man dissolved in tears, yet speaking in such a sharp, thin voice. Kozhemyakin's pity for him grew.

"She'll stand up for me against Vanya and against the Lord God. She'll be my defence on the Judgement Day, only I doubt they'll be calling you and me before the judgement seat: we've been punished enough down here below, haven't we?"

"Only the Lord can say that," said Kozhemyakin softly. "We know nothing, we were born blind—"

"Blind, you say?" interrupted Khryapov, stretching his thin lips. "Perhaps we were. But you cling to Lyuba," he advised him solemnly. "She always knows the right thing to say." He drew in a deep breath, touching Kozhemyakin's elbow with a trembling hand, and went on in an undertone: "She knows how to find a justification for everything. Per-

haps she'll be a great saint some day—a real one, not the kind that goes off to live alone in the wilderness, but the kind that goes among simple folk, burning with a desire to help them and save them from their sins. She's like a sister, she really is!" He bounced up and down on his chair and said joyfully, in the same choking whisper: "How she does give it to that fool of a Vanya! But gently, I'll have you know. 'It's only because you always get enough to eat that you're upright and honest,' she says to him. 'And you're a great loafer,' she says. Do your hear? How do you like that? 'If you were poor and had to work for a living you'd be as wicked as anyone else and wouldn't care a hang about your honour.' D'you hear that?"

Raising a finger, he said happily:

"Oh, no; she'll never marry him. Not she. Never."

Kozhemyakin was delighted but greatly astonished.

"Why, don't you love your grandson?" he asked.

"Love him? I try not to forget he's my own flesh and blood. But if your arm is seized with convulsions and strikes you in the face and there's nothing you can do to stop it, do you love it?" He opened his mouth wide and burst out laughing. "Oh, how I do love a joke!" he gasped weakly, throwing up his hands and slapping his thigh. "Look, just look what's expected of a man: before he sets about work he must bring a son into the world and bring him up so that he can say to him: 'Respected flesh of my flesh, how am I to live and what am I to engage in so that you'll not be denouncing me as a rapscallion and spitting in my face one fine day? Be so kind as to instruct your poor father.' Very nice, eh? Yes, my dear Matvei Savelyevich; very comical and unpleasant."

He gave Kozhemyakin's sleeve a tug and said in conclusion:

"But a man's got to live just the same, and to think about these things, and it's important to go deep, to look into the very heart of a man. Lyuba's the one to do that. She's—

ho, what wouldn't I give for a chance to crawl out of my grave when she reaches the age of forty and have a look at her! But the worms won't let me, I suppose."

Kozhemyakin heaved a sigh and involuntarily recoiled again. Khryapov shut his eyes to squeeze out the tears and shook his head:

"Vanya is going to be a rich man—very, very rich." He turned his head and listened a moment, then said softly: "But I've put something in the bank for her, too—about two thousand. What d'you think of that?"

"Not bad," said Kozhemyakin. "Although, of course, goodness is of more value than money."

"Pooh!" said Khryapov. "Goodness may be of more value than money, but nobody will give you a kopek for it. That's why folk like us don't count. Goodness ought to be repaid a hundredfold, with the price going up all the time. That would be the right kind of competition. You do me three kopeks' worth of good and I do you three rubles' worth in return; you do me thirty rubles' worth and I do you three hundred in return. That'd be a lively sort of a game, one that people would throw themselves into heart and soul—a perfect frenzy of trying to do good. Who could ever think of a better game than that? The devil would be put to shame for all time, and even the Lord God would be made to squirm, for, the truth is, He's not too liberal with His benefits, not too kind and merciful."

The old man quivered with excitement, he scratched his feet over the floor in a sort of dance and his crippled hands clutched at the tassels and collar of his dressing-gown, at the edge of the table, the table-cloth and Kozhemyakin's clothes.

"And we expect God to answer for our debts! That'd be a swindle for sure! Oh, no, you've got to pay yourself—yourself, mind. For fifteen years I've been worrying about Vanya, trying to launch him in life, clean and honest—make him a present of a life without labour. . . ."

So that's what's been eating into his heart, thought Kozhemyakin sympathetically. But he was weary of the old man's talk and felt he could not listen to it any longer, or breathe the stifling air of this dark, over-furnished room. He got up, took Khryapov's hand in his and pressed it warmly.

"I've enjoyed our talk, Mikhailo Kirillovich. Thank you for it, and for your kindness and goodwill."

"Are you going?"

Khryapov tried to rise.

"Don't get up; dont trouble yourself."

"That's all right," muttered the old man, struggling to his feet. "I may be twenty years your senior but I can still stand up in your presence. That's all right. You're a curious fellow. Come and see me more often, will you? Lyuba has told me lots of interesting things about you."

With his hand on Kozhemyakin's shoulder he went with him to the door, where, holding on to the jamb, he said:

"Come again, d'you hear? I'll not be leaving the house but to go to my grave. It's waiting for me there on the far side of the cemetery near where your folk are buried—your stepmother and the old soldier. Very nice to see what good care you take of them. Do you go there often?"

"Oh, now and then."

"Come and visit me, too, when I'm there. A dead man's a good person to talk to, he won't lie to you nor hurt your feelings." He chuckled, then added quietly, "But I'm just joking, of course."

That's life for you, thought Kozhemyakin sadly as he walked home. There's no escape from it, not for anybody. I like what he said about goodness: 'a perfect frenzy of doing good.' It seems to me Mark Vasilyevich reached the point of frenzy. Well, Lyuba, so you brought us together.

A damp wind was blowing fitfully, tearing the last leaves off the bare trees. They fell on the moist ground and went whirling along the street, under fences and gateways.

When he had almost reached his house Kozhemyakin was met by Sukhobayev and Tiunov. Sukhobayev was in a state of great excitement. He pushed his hat to the back of his head and pointed almost accusingly at his bedraggled one-eyed companion, who looked as if he had had nothing to eat for a week.

"This man came to me with alarming news. He says he knows you and so I brought him here to talk it over."

"Have you been in the town long?" asked Kozhemyakin.

When he had shaken hands solemnly, Tiunov walked along the street beside them, lifting his long legs like a stork and telling Kozhemyakin in detail how he had come.

"I arrived by post coach on Wednesday, went to the bath-house and set out to speak to the mayor, for the papers only confuse a person and the only way to get a clear picture of what's happening is to talk to a witness who only wants everything to be honest and for the best."

He spoke calmly and unhurriedly, but again the impression was that he was shouting from the house-tops. His piercing eye darted from one face to the other and his eyebrows were drawn down severely.

They entered the house, took off their things and sat down at the table.

"The situation is ve-ry serious, Matvei Savelyevich," said Sukhobayev grimly, licking his lips.

"Yes, indeed," concurred Tiunov, his one eye fixed on a point above Kozhemyakin's head. "Things look bad. First of all, it's clear that the workers and artisans and suchlike small fry know what they want, a thing that can hardly be said of the merchants, and it's very possible that these same small fry will leap right over the merchants and into the State Duma, a body into whose hands all power is to be given, and it's no secret that the small fry take a cut-throat view of things and their minds are governed by foreigners—Jews and the like—who've more brains than we have, a fact nobody can deny."

His words came in a long and steady flow, pouring over his listeners like grain out of a sack, stunning them and filling them with alarm.

"But I don't quite understand," said Kozhemyakin, wrinkling his face with the effort. "Where's the danger? If the people have come to understand at last what's good for them—"

Sukhobayev leaped out of his chair.

"Think what you're saying! What people? I have no faith in Jews, but there are folk who're a sight more dangerous than Jews—folk who don't know their place, and go running ahead against the set order of things." He hunched his shoulders and licked his lips. "You yourself said, Matvei Savelyevich, that the merchants should take over now, that the gentry have faded out of the picture. And instead, here come the lower classes. God knows what'll happen if they ever get themselves into the Duma!" He sat blinking his eyes in consternation and despair. "There'll be nothing left for us but to go into the steppe and eat horse meat with the savages."

"There'll be a terrific fight, that's as sure as can be," said Tiunov. "These upstarts are making a noise before their time, and the reason is that their heads have been pumped full of the most outlandish hopes."

"Hopes of what?" asked Kozhemyakin, studying Tiunov's face with its sunken cheeks and the black circle under his one eye that made him look as if he had been in a fight.

Tiunov turned to him impressively.

"First of all, equality of rights and a dividing-up of all land and riches equally among everybody."

"Hear that?" cried Sukhobayev. "What's there to divide up? Where's the riches? It'd come to less than a kopek a head."

"But the most important and regrettable, as well as the most dangerous," said Tiunov very clearly and precisely, as if he were speaking in court, "is that all this has been

worked up by foreigners. Seeing that the small people in Russia are given to day-dreaming, and that their lot isn't an easy one, these foreigners have taken advantage of it to whisper the most outlandish hopes into their ears, so outlandish that the authorities and all respectable folk can't help seeing at once how mad their demands are."

Sukhobayev cocked his head, then leaned forward to ask:

"Why should the foreigners do such a thing?"

"Here's why," Tiunov was speaking louder, quicker and less smoothly now. "They want to make those in power distrust the common folk, and to do this they try to make them look as foolish as possible. So that anyone can see it's a fool speaking, a well-meaning idiot."

His eye flashed in a circle that took in his listeners, he grasped the edge of the table with both hands and straightened his arms as if reining in a horse. The scar on his face turned red, his sharp nose turned purple, blotches broke out on his grimy face and his voice cracked.

"Here's their line of thinking: firstly, Russia is spreading out. Secondly, those in power have bungled things and know it. Thirdly, they've lost their grasp, so they turn to the people for help: 'Here, let's run things together like good friends.' But those sly foreigners—seems to me they're Germans, though most of the evidence points to the Jews—these foreigners calculate that if things go that way Russia will struggle back to her feet on her own, and that doesn't suit them, not in the least. And there you have the secret of their politics: prove that the Russian common folk are a set of fools and there's no help to be got from them."

"Hm-m," said Sukhobayev, shaking his head, "sounds wrong to me. Not convincing. Seems to me it's not there the danger lies."

"Just there, in that very spot!" cried Tiunov hotly, letting go of the table.

They began arguing, at first politely, selecting soft, round words, but later, as their anger waxed, becoming rude and insulting to each other.

"How can a man who doesn't know what the people want be mayor of this town?" asked Tiunov sarcastically.

"You're one of those that spread this claptrap among them," retorted Sukhobayev in a trembling voice.

Kozhemyakin had been deeply impressed by Tiunov's news and was vexed that he and Sukhobayev should be involved in a quarrel. He tried to stop them, but in vain.

"Don't," he murmured. "The main thing is that we should be in agreement with one another."

He kept seeing the face of old Khryapov and remembering what he had said about goodness: that men must work themselves into a perfect frenzy of doing good, and the memory gave rise to an idea that sent a thrill of pleasure through him: "What if everybody should be converted to this idea and that would be the beginning of—of—"

"Stop!" he said to the quarrellers. "Let's come to an agreement."

Sukhobayev's eyes were flashing and he was white with rage.

"Oh, no!" he said with a hard little laugh, "I'll never agree with that. Never."

"Why not?" asked Tiunov coldly, piercing him with a dark eye.

"Because there's a certain order of things that has got to be observed in life."

"And what might it be?"

"I come first and you come second—that's what."

"I won't try to get ahead of you, but there's one question I'd like to ask: where have you been all this time?"

"Where? Here."

"And what is 'here'? Is it Russia or isn't it?"

"Hm. I—er—"

Sukhobayev fell silent, afraid to answer.

"That's the whole point," said Tiunov excitedly. "Nobody seems to know exactly where he is."

"That's true," chimed in Kozhemyakin. "That's very, very true, Vasily Vasilyevich."

"Why?" asked Sukhobayev anxiously.

Kozhemyakin was unable to explain; he drew a deep breath and dropped his eyes self-consciously.

"Because," Tiunov rattled on, "we have a feeling first of all that we're in our own district, our own town, our own house (our own house above everything else), but we have no feeling about what they're linked with. We don't feel Russia all around us, and we never give her a thought."

"There, you see?" said Kozhemyakin trying to effect a reconciliation. But Sukhobayev began stamping the floor as if he had cramp in his legs and uttered hoarsely:

"Good-day to you."

And out he went.

"Dear me," said Kozhemyakin in a crestfallen tone, getting up and gazing after him. Tiunov, too, got up, thrust out his chin, waved one hand deprecatingly and started pacing the floor.

"It's the same thing everywhere," he muttered. "Every province has its own god and its own virgin and every district has its own saint. You'd think the time had come to join forces, but nothing of the sort. The peasants cry, 'Everything belongs to us!' The workers cry back, 'No it doesn't—the factories belong to us!' And the educated folk, instead of lending their support to the common cause and what's sensible, cry: 'Put all the power into our hands and we'll see you get paid for it!' With things in such a state the common cause is like a lamb caught by a pack of hungry wolves."

He bumped into a table, ran his hands over it, sat down and felt the scar where his eye had been. The other eye was moist and mild and blinked as if frightened.

"Look, Matvei Savelyevich, I've only got one eye, but I can see better than that two-eyed wall-eyed mayor of yours. He's a downright fool, nothing less."

A drop of sweat made a streak down his cheek, his nostrils quivered and his lips twitched convulsively.

"There's nothing that binds the people together, Matvei Savelyevich," he whined. "They're all strangers to one another. Take you, for instance, do you know what the Saratov Province is like and what sort of folk live there?"

"No, I don't," admitted Kozhemyakin guiltily.

"That's it," said Tiunov with a sad shake of his head. "And what you don't know may be the cause of Russia's ruin. There are big things going on in Saratov, the folk are trying to get to the root of the matter, and they're burning down the manor houses, just in case. True, they've got good reason to, the gentry burnt plenty of peasants alive in their day, but still the manor houses had nothing to do with it. Ah, yes, it's very likely Russia'll come to ruin. In the midst of all the excitement the Germans—a brawny race dumped on us by our Catherine—the Germans, I say, are calm and smug. That's a fact. And they're licking their lips. Yes, sir; I saw it myself—a German standing with his pipe in his hand, grinning and licking his lips, and the flames of three houses licking the sky."

Kozhemyakin wanted to say something consoling, he could see Tiunov was consumed by fear and worry, but there was nothing to say. So he just sat drawing circles on the table with his finger while Tiunov went on in a tense, hoarse voice:

"You wouldn't believe what's happening in Vorgorod. There's big crowds in the streets shouting at the top of their voices, and all sorts of people—Russians and Jews, but mostly young folk—are making stirring speeches to them. 'It'll come to a bad end,' thinks I to myself, and I climb up to have my say: 'Good friends,' I said, 'Good Russian people, it's not of yourselves you want to think,

but of the fate of Russia, of all her people.' But they pulled me down by the feet and the coat-tails and pushed me away and shouted names at me—'Black Hundred' and the rest—and one lad (an amiable fellow, I found out later) gave me a punch in the back. So I turned to him politely and asked him why he should give me a punch in the back. 'Oho! So you're used to getting it in the *nose*, are you?' says he. Note that: 'So you're used to getting it in the nose.' Especially the 'used to.' How do you like that? Could anything be more Russian?—'used to getting it in the nose.' 'You're mistaken, young man,' I said. 'That's not what I meant.' 'In the belly, then?' he said. Well, he and I went to a pub together after that, and I was almost in tears—not from the blow, mind you, but because my feelings were hurt. We had a little talk and he admitted everything. 'Sorry, old man,' he said, 'I'm an ass and I struck you without any cause and now I'm ashamed. That,' says he, 'is because I've been dragged round by the hair and punched in the nose so much myself that at times I want to find out what pleasure a man can get from punching another in the nose.'"

Tiunov lifted his head with his beard jutting out, and Kozhemyakin saw that the beard was shaking.

"Note the word 'pleasure.' Just that: 'pleasure.' And it was spoken by a lively fellow with a heart of gold, so there was no harm in it; no harm this time, but in general—?"

Tiunov got up and leaned on the table.

"I swear I don't understand a thing, Matvei Savelyevich. I talk and argue my head off, but I don't understand a damned thing. All I can make out is that folk are stirred up, that there are forces rising in rebellion, that the Russian spirit is riding high and the Russian people are collecting in great crowds, but nobody can tell me where it'll lead to and what's the true path. I seem to have a little glimmer every once in a while, but I can't put my finger on it. I'm filled with pity and scalding tears. That's all. I'm afraid, Matvei Savelyevich. Afraid that Russia will come to ruin."

"I don't understand anything either," said Kozhemyakin in a hollow voice, and the two of them grew silent, sitting there opposite each other, mute and motionless.

"There's a certain young girl—" began Matvei Savelyevich.

"I know those young girls," interrupted Tiunov with a toss of his head.

Again they sat on in silence.

"I must have caught a chill," said Tiunov after some time.

"Lie down," said Kozhemyakin, tired of looking at him and wanting neither to talk nor be talked to.

Tiunov went over to the couch and lay down with his legs drawn up, but a moment later a shudder passed over him, he sat up, and waved his arms as if swimming.

"There are a lot of lofty words being spoken these days, Matvei Savelyevich, and very full of meaning they are; and a lot of people have appeared on the scene with great hearts wide open to receive whatever is said to them. And they're all young folk and so they ought to be told things carefully and simply, but nobody's careful with them. Quite the contrary. The whirlwind has come and it's sweeping the dirt off the face of the earth into their open hearts."

He closed his eye, threw himself back on the couch and said, stretching his legs convulsively:

"Everything can come to ruin. That gentleman that calls himself head of this town—head? Just the opposite, that's what he is."

I've got to get away, thought Kozhemyakin, feeling that he could not bear to listen to another word. He went over to the couch and explained apologetically that he had some business to attend to, at which Tiunov opened his eye and said with an injured air:

"Am I keeping you from it?"

He's hopeless, thought Kozhemyakin as he closed the gate behind him.

A grey evening was stealing down from the bald and sterile hills. There was a red gash in the sky above the bog, like a deep wound out of which the blood was pouring, staining the tips of the trees and leaving the sky lifeless, dying. Crows were cawing raucously as they returned from the fields to their nests. Coopers were hammering quickly, impatient to be done with the day's work. The street was as damp and empty as a wash-tub out of which the dirty water has just been thrown. Lights had not yet been lit in the houses, and the dark smudges of the windows glowered at one another as if expecting trouble.

A woman ran out of one of the yards whimpering and pulling her shawl about her. On reaching Kozhemyakin she stopped and shifted oddly from one foot to the other, then, ducking her head and letting out a wail, ran down the street with her slippers flapping on her bare feet. As he watched her go Kozhemyakin said to himself:

Somebody's dying and she's gone to fetch the priest.

He was shocked by the impassivity with which he said it.

A cold mist hovered above the central square which had recently been paved with big cobble-stones now gleaming like eyes. Yellow light poured through the five windows of *The Lisbon,* sending five yellow paths across the cobble-stones.

Kozhemyakin heard hasty steps behind him. He withdrew into the shadow of a gateway and saw Tiunov emerge from a side street, go stumbling into one of the paths of light, and disappear into the tavern.

What a restless soul! thought Kozhemyakin approvingly, and he, too, entered the tavern.

The tap-room was as full of people as a crock full of beans, and although Kozhemyakin was acquainted with most of them, they looked different in the light of the big hanging lamps. He saw red noses and shining baldpates.

Arms flashed, backs bent and twisted, there was a hum of excited, disconnected chatter. In the special corner reserved for distinguished guests most of the town's leading citizens had gathered round Sukhobayev, and from their midst his high voice rose. In the opposite corner local officials were jabbering away, among them fat Pokivaiko, head of the local garrison; Nemtsev, assistant to the Chief of Police; and Lyuba's father, with bloated face and swollen eyes.

Kozhemyakin stood in the doorway for some time searching for a seat and listening to the thick hum of voices.

"Shed upon us the light of reason," he heard Posulov chant in his tenor voice.

"To thee we bow, oh sun of righteousness," came an answering bass.

Always using other people's words, thought Kozhemyakin who, unobserved, had found a seat for himself in a corner between a cupboard and a door leading into another room. Sitting down, he went on listening and heard the same trite phrases:

"The halt leading the blind!" cried a jovial voice, at which someone growled in reply:

"Sodom and Gomorrah."

"Our rulers make a fine show of themselves when there's no need for it," came the complaint.

"And now here we are left to our own resources."

But above all others, squeaking like a rusty hinge, could be heard Tiunov's voice:

"I don't give a fig for what you think of me, my good sir!"

"Sh!" cried someone, pounding on the table. For a second the room grew quiet, and in the silence could be heard someone reciting with exaggerated feeling:

I knew the cause of his sorrow,
He knew the cause of my grief;
I thought that he'd do the treating,
He thought that I'd foot the bill.

There was a little outburst of laughter and again the room was noisy, and again came the cries:

"I know this Russia of ours! I've seen the whole of her. I'm not the outsider, it's you—"

"Hush!" cried Posulov, getting up. The word was repeated by several others and the din died down again.

"You don't know the rich inheritance that's rightfully ours and there's little you value in life," came Tiunov's voice. "An outsider is one who has no love for anybody and no desire to help his brothers."

"And who," cried out Sukhobayev, "might you be? What is it you're after?"

"I'm a human being."

"A waiter? One of the help?"

Many of the men laughed, but Kozhemyakin felt sorry for Tiunov. He looked into the far corner through veils of blue tobacco smoke and longed to call out to him:

"Don't waste your breath!"

But from somewhere in the middle of the room, at the table where Posulov and the choir master were sitting, came a low, clear, authoritative voice. All heads turned towards it, faces grew tense with listening, men gestured their companions to silence, and some requested quietly:

"Stand up, we can't see you."

"Louder."

"Be quiet, fellows."

"Who is it?"

"Nobody knows."

"Give us simple folk the chance and we'll set up a new order of things that'll be more human. Leave us to ourselves, stop urging us to scratch each other's eyes out, don't teach us there's only one law and nothing can change it. Let people find new laws for living together in peace and harmony and doing away with cruelty—"

Kozhemyakin fancied that the room was growing brighter, the air purer and easier to breathe. He glanced

about and saw the listening faces and heard a murmur of approval. He himself surrendered to the gentle wave on which the crowd was being lifted up and the people thrown closer together. Feeling an almost physical contact with the ideas, so welcome and easily comprehended, that were welding them into a single body, he had a momentary recollection of the monastery orchard, the finely chiselled features of the Venerable Ioan's face, the haggard, miserable faces of the crowd, and the sweet words poured like treacle into their distorted mouths, open, it seemed, to let out cries of anguish.

"Who will tell us the truth that's as necessary to us as our daily bread? And who will tell the world the truth about us? Only we can do it, and we must prepare ourselves for this task, brothers and comrades. We ourselves must speak about ourselves, boldly, keeping nothing back. Let us pour all our hopes and aspirations into one great heart, and let it sing a song about us in words of our own creating!"

"Thank you, young man!"

The crowd grew clamorous and pressed towards the wall where the scarred face with the round eyes of a seer rose above all others. But presently the harsh, high voice of Sukhobayev rang out:

"Fellow-townsmen! And you, officers of this town! What's going on here? Nobody knows who these people are who come here and say whatever they like, stirring people up, while the fact of the matter is nobody knows anything—"

"At least we know who *you* are. Thieves, all of you!"

"What's that?"

"You heard me."

"Say it again."

"With pleasure."

And in an instant everything was spinning and churning and yelling and screeching and pushing against Kozhe-

myakin. Dazed, he tried to reach the wall where the speaker had been standing.

"I own this tavern!" yelled Sukhobayev.

Tables and chairs were smashed, dishes broken, the pieces were crunched underfoot, somebody let out a piercing whistle, somebody else seized Kozhemyakin by the collar, catching his beard in it and dragged him away, shouting:

"Take a look! Here's a specimen of them! Take a look, everybody!"

"Let me go," he gasped, struggling to free himself.

The two of them were caught in the crowd and carried down the steps and out into the square in front of the tavern. Kozhemyakin tore himself out of the hands of the cobbler and made his way back up the steps, panting with exhaustion and excitement. He turned to face the crowd and through the roaring in his ears heard somebody shout:

"Why the devil did you have to pick on him?"

"They say he reads books on Black Magic—he's the one Sukhobayev did out of his money."

"He left all his property to the town to build a school."

A broad-faced lad seized Kozhemyakin's hand and shook it.

"He made a mistake, the fat-head," he said apologetically.

Posulov, Prachkin and Tiunov came up to him, but he waved them away and called down to the crowd:

"I don't mind. It's easy for a man who's been kicked about all his life to make a mistake."

He wanted to get down on his knees to steady himself; instead he grasped the post of the porch with both hands and shouted, as if a light had suddenly been lit within him:

"Brothers! Fellow-townsmen! These young folk have come, pure as angels, to speak the unknown word to us, to speak God's truth to us, and we must listen. They have a sense of the eternal, of the truth come from God. And we must listen quietly, with rapt attention and with open

minds. What if we don't know them? We don't know them because they're seeking for the truth and they bear righteousness in their hearts, a righteousness we have no knowledge of."

"True, old man!" came a voice from down below.

"We've lived our lives as in a dream, doing nothing for ourselves or anybody else, and now these young folk have come to take our place."

He crossed himself with a wide gesture.

"God help them to live different lives from ours and to keep them from tasting the bitterness that has eaten into our bones. God help them to find the true path leading to righteousness—that is our wish for them."

The porch slipped out from under him and the earth rose up and crashed down upon him, knocking him over.

When he came to he was at home and in bed. The room was so brightly lit that it hurt his eyes, and the windows were velvety black. The consumptive tenor was curled up on the stove-bunk and up and down in front of him walked a thin dandified man with his hands in his pockets and a scornful look on his angular face. Lyuba was sitting at the table and saying to him, smiling:

"I don't believe you."

The thin man took his watch out of his pocket and looked at it.

"So you don't believe me?" he said.

"No, I don't."

He snapped the watch shut.

"Very sorry to hear it," he drawled. "Have you sent for the medicine?"

Lyuba nodded without taking her eyes off him, and he again began pacing the floor, dragging his feet affectedly.

The tenor sat up and put his hands in his pockets too.

"Why should you think such things, doctor?" he said.

"Because I choose to," he replied, his eyes fixed on the floor.

Kozhemyakin did not stir. He watched the people in the room through his eyelashes, avoiding looking at the black squares of the windows.

I've fallen ill again, he thought, listening to the quick beating of his heart and sensible of an overwhelming weakness in his whole body, even in his fingers.

"Am I ill, Lyuba?" he asked as loudly and distinctly as he could, but to his surprise she seemed not to hear him, for she made no reply. Frightened, he uttered a groan, and at this she jumped up and hurried over to him. The doctor, too, came towards him without quickening his step, and this made Kozhemyakin dislike him.

"What is it?" asked Lyuba, putting her ear to his lips.

"Allow me," said the doctor, pushing her away. Again he took out his watch and pursed his lips as if about to whistle. His face was sallow and he had a thin dark moustache under his big aquiline nose. His eyes were green and his shaven cheeks and chin were bluish. There was something cruel and sinister about his round head covered with smooth black hair.

"Everything's clear," he said as he laid Kozhemyakin's hand on the cover too gingerly, insulting the patient. "So that will be all, Mademoiselle—"

"Matushkina."

"I keep wanting to call you Batyushkina—a more common name. So you'll remember everything?"

"Naturally."

"Well then, until tomorrow."

Lyuba spoke in a loud curt tone that was unusual for her, and the doctor spoke with irritating precision, as if his words were numbers. When he had gone, Kozhemyakin opened his eyes. He wanted to take a deep breath but he could not: something in his chest pricked him sharply every time he tried.

Lyuba sat down beside the bed and stroked his hand.

Summoning all his strength, he said to her:

"What's the matter with me, am I dying?"

"Goodness, no!" she cried with a start, dropping his hand. "Whatever made you think such a thing?"

"You just have a weak heart," said the tenor. "Nothing serious."

"You mustn't do anything," added Lyuba.

"I never have done anything," he said with an attempt at a laugh.

The floor rocked and the walls veered, and this made his head go round. Again he closed his eyes. It was so quiet that he longed to hear some sound, even the ticking of a clock, but the clock had stopped.

"Don't you like him?" asked the tenor after a while.

"No. Sh, not so loud."

Kozhemyakin wanted to beg them to speak as loudly as they liked, but he was afraid they might stop talking altogether if he did. He strained his ears to catch words that scarcely vibrated in the silence.

"Now that people are proclaiming their age-old griefs and hardships in the market-place," whispered the young man, "they'll naturally take a different view of things. The main thing is to get to know one another, and to admit that such a life is bad for everybody alike. Some, of course, will try to say, 'Thank goodness I'm well off.' That's foolish; there's no sense in being ashamed, we must admit honestly that everything's bad, and bad for everybody."

Tiunov came in and joined in the whispering.

"Think of your country, I say, of Russia. Here we are building a new cathedral, and you keep talking of a slaughter-house."

Lyuba murmured some words that pacified him. The whites of her eyes seemed to have become brighter and the irises darker. She behaved as if she were the mistress of the house and Shakir had become completely devoted to her,

to Kozhemyakin's delight. The weakness was leaving him now and his heart was beating more firmly.

The next morning Sukhobayev came to see him. He surveyed the patient as if memorizing his measurements.

"Nothing wrong with you but the vertigo," he commented.

Vanya Khryapov came and announced unhappily that his grandfather, too, was very ill, and Lyuba, after flitting anxiously about the room for a moment, went out.

Bless your heart, said Kozhemyakin to himself as he watched her go, you're always bringing joy to somebody.

The days marched past with long strides, noisily, busily, giving promise of something better ahead. Every day the sick man saw Prachkin, Tiunov and friends of theirs who gathered in Pelageya's room to hold lively discussions. The house resembled a beehive, with Lyuba as the queen bee. She listened to everyone and smiled at everyone, she served them tea, she mended Prachkin's torn coat, put a patch on Tiunov's sheepskin and kept running over to the sick man to ask:

"Feeling better?"

"Much better," he would say.

He felt perfectly well, but the doctor forbade him to get up. In the doctor's presence an odd change came over Lyuba; she would walk as severely erect as a soldier, her bosom held high, her lips in a thin line, her eyes following him with disapproval. She answered his questions very brusquely. Even when she said "yes" to him the impression was that she was arguing the point. And Kozhemyakin kept an antagonistic eye on him and sighed with relief when he went out (he always put on his soft hat in the room, pulling it low over his forehead and his right ear). Strangely enough, the doctor made no comment on what was going on in the town, and when he was asked about it he answered as briefly and reluctantly as if the words he spoke had a bad taste. His sallow face expressed neither joy

nor fear nor curiosity: nothing of what everyone else was experiencing at that time. His eyes had a bored, abstracted expression and his hands touched things cautiously, even squeamishly. People found him tiresome and could not help thinking that nothing good could happen in his presence.

If only he doesn't go tempting Lyuba, thought Kozhemyakin anxiously. Dear Lord, watch over her.

One morning he woke up very early and, feeling almost well, dressed himself, then woke up Shakir and said:

"Help me to the armchair, Shakir. I've forgotten how to walk."

Shakir took him by the arm and led him over to the window, blinking his eyes and muttering happily:

"Come, we go. Now all the bother begins again."

Kozhemyakin sat down, gazed at the trees and crossed himself.

"Here, Shakir, let me kiss you."

The Tatar fell weeping on his neck.

"That's all right," said Kozhemyakin soothingly as he patted his friend's bristly cheek. "We'll go on living a little longer, God willing. How glad I am to be up!"

"God grant you many more days happy," murmured Shakir, speaking more brokenly than ever in his agitation. "God must be glad He has good man, He doesn't have many good men."

The two friends smiled at each other. The sick man longed to take a deep breath but he was afraid to, and waited eagerly for the day to come when he could fill his lungs to bursting.

"See, Shakir? We've lived to see some good folk born into the world," he said.

"Yes, yes," nodded the Tatar. "Young folk. Very good folk."

"How do you like Lyuba?"

Shakir opened his mouth and laughed the gay, kind-hearted laugh of the old days.

"Russian women are the best women."

The door was opened softly and Lyuba stood there with her head wrapped in an old torn shawl.

"Why are you up?" she asked in alarm.

"I'm up because I'm up," replied Kozhemyakin flippantly.

Shakir burst out laughing, doubling up, shaking his head, holding on to his knees with both hands. Lyuba slowly unwound her shawl as she came towards the window. She brought with her a whiff of cold air, her lashes were gleaming with hoarfrost and her cheeks were red. But her eyes were swollen and there was distress in them.

"What's the matter?" asked Kozhemyakin anxiously.

"Nothing," she said, forcing a smile.

Her voice trembled and she lowered her wet lashes. Kozhemyakin sighed gently and took her hand.

"Has he died—Khryapov?"

She nodded and sat down on the arm of his chair.

"At three o'clock this morning."

The news was a tiny grey cloud floating across the clear sky of a spring day.

She was afraid to tell me, tried to spare me, he thought gratefully.

"May God give peace to his soul," he said aloud, crossing himself. "I'll be the next one."

"Oh, no!" she cried.

He was gladdened by her cry of protest. Feeling that he ought to say something else about Khryapov, he became lost in thought, but it was of her rather than Khryapov he was thinking as he gazed at her pale face and her puzzled eyes turned to the window.

"It was so hard for him to—to—" she murmured softly.

"To die," Kozhemyakin finished for her.

"Yes. Horrible."

She darted a frightened look at Kozhemyakin, then spoke more freely.

"D'you remember how he used to say, 'I'm just joking'? He said it for the last time at about midnight, and soon after that he began flinging himself about and crying: 'Take them away! Take them away!' It was dreadful to hear him."

"Take what away?"

"I don't know, but Vanya carried all sorts of things out of the room and moved the furniture about."

"Did Vanya cry?"

"Yes. Not much. He was frightened."

"And you?"

"Me?" She thought a moment. "It was frightening while he was dying, and when it was all over I felt angry. Why should he have suffered so? I can't understand it. It seems so cruel and unnecessary."

Kozhemyakin drew a breath slowly and so deeply that a pain shot through his heart and his head went round.

"I envy those who will be near you," he said, squeezing her fingers. "God give you the strength to minister to them all."

Two days later, supported by Lyuba and Tiunov, he was walking along the street behind Khryapov's coffin. The town was wrapped in autumn fog, big drops of water gathered at the tips of the bare branches and fell heavily upon the ground, people's clothes were beaded with moisture like drops of quicksilver. It was not a big funeral, no more than ten people followed the coffin of the jocular money-lender before whom all the town had bowed down while he was still alive. The coffin itself—a heavy oaken one—was carried by hired pallbearers.

Yet it seemed that all the townsfolk, keeping their distance, were yet taking part in this funeral, which was without show, without even a choir. Along all the streets, like insects on the surface of a stagnant pond, darted anxious citizens. Groups of ragamuffins gathered in the square in front of *The Lisbon* and on the porch of the cathedral,

buzzing like wasps and with expectant looks on their faces. Wooden mounted police with whips in their lowered right hands rode past, the policeman Kapendyukhin sauntered through the fog, drunks were to be met with everywhere. Sukhobayev went riding past in a carriage drawn by a dappled horse, his sharp eyes narrowed as if he were searching for something. Men and women leaped over puddles and went hurrying along with the skirts of their coats flapping like sails in the wind, and reminded one of boats heeling on angry waves. A hum of human voices filled the air and the hammers of the coopers were silent—an unusual thing in Okurov. Even the houses seemed to have opened their attic windows to listen for the lost sound, and, not hearing it, stared at one another in amazement, their square eyes filmed with moisture. The fog had dimmed the heavy contours of the cathedral belfry; usually it thrust into the sky, red and fleshy; today it was grey and indistinct.

Over Vanya Khryapov's shoulder Kozhemyakin caught a glimpse of the colourful wreath on the dead man's brow, of strands of yellowed hair peeping from under the wreath, of his bluish hands folded on his black frock-coat. In his coffin Khryapov looked more seemly: his red and running eyes were tightly shut, his fangs were hidden under his moustache and his spiteful smile was gone. Now his sunken lips were curved in a smile that was different—more genial and apologetic—and it seemed to say: "Well, here I am, dead at last."

None of the people in the procession spoke of the deceased, they spoke only of the affairs of the town.

But from time to time a group of artisans would emerge out of the fog and surround the coffin, asking:

"Who is it?"

"Khryapov."

"The money-lender?"

"Yes."

"Kicked the bucket at last, has he?"

Some of them uttered obscene oaths; others would come up to men in the procession and ask jovially:

"Couldn't you sacrifice the price of a drink in the name of that dead sinner?"

They would vanish, only to reappear again with their begging. Father Alexander hurried along at the head of the procession with his cross held high. Every now and again he would stop to say something, and once he was heard to cry out:

"Your hat—take off your hat!"

And a deep voice growled in reply:

"I'll take it off to the cross, but not to him."

"They don't know how to behave themselves," said Kozhemyakin to Tiunov, who looked more like a charred stick than ever, only now a wet one.

"They're like young hounds that have been kept on the leash too long; now that they've been let loose they rush here and there, seeing how far they can go. They don't understand." He paused before adding: "And they can't be expected to understand. A blind man's sure to do some damage as he goes feeling about in the dark."

Kozhemyakin felt there was truth in his words. The people were deliberately cheerful, wilfully noisy, defiantly rude. They sniffed and tried everything, but their boldness lacked assurance, and behind their mocking smiles and challenging cries one seemed to hear them asking:

"May I?"

Many of them pretended to be more drunk than they really were. They wound their arms about one another and staggered along, or, standing in the middle of the street, saluted the funeral procession by bawling coarse songs. Their companions watched them with curiosity but did nothing to stop them, and so, chagrined and confounded, they broke off in the middle of the song and slunk away.

Two such hooligans uprooted a lamppost and walked ahead of the procession on the pavement with it. The procession caught them up but nobody said a word to them

and Kozhemyakin saw the youths put down the post without looking at each other and dash off into the fog.

Tiunov's one eye flashed.

"The cat'll cry over the mice yet," he hissed.

They took Khryapov to the cemetery and buried him. When everything was over Father Alexander hastily took off his vestments, put on his black cassock, glared at the people with his enormous eyes, pulled his crumpled hat down over his ears and walked swiftly away among the graves, his walk reminding Kozhemyakin of the flight of a frightened bird.

Kozhemyakin went over to his corner of the cemetery and sat down on a bench under the green canopy of a fir-tree, whose spreading boughs had been washed clean by the rain. Delicate birch branches bent sadly over the two mounds, and uncut grass with pearls of moisture glistening in it encircled the graves.

Lyuba sat next to him with drooping head. With one hand on her shoulder and the other grasping the silken trunk of a birch, he said with a sigh:

"This is the only good thing I've ever done in life—planted these five trees."

"That's not true," she said softly.

"It is. A simple soldier lies here, Lyuba, but now I realize he was a great man."

She raised her head and there were tears in her eyes. Taking his hand, she said in a loud voice:

"You must take the very best care of yourself so that you can write about life as it was, and as it will never be again." Then, pulling at his hand in her agitation, she dropped her voice to a whisper: "He's dead now, and everybody knows how mean and greedy he was, but nobody knows how he suffered—nobody. He used to say, 'Nobody ever taught me to be kind, and they were right, because they brought me up to be a blood-sucker.' And he wasn't joking when he said that—oh, no! I know they'll

remember only evil of him, nothing but evil, and in that way they'll multiply the evil, won't they? Everybody takes pleasure in remembering the bad, but that wasn't the whole of him. Not by any means. And we ought to speak about the whole of a person and as much as possible about the good in him—we ought to take pains to seek out the good, oughtn't we?"

She turned a special look upon him, one that communicated ideas and at the same time sought for them.

Kozhemyakin got up.

"Yes, we ought," he said.

He took off his hat, bowed to the graves, and in a calm, matter-of-fact tone said to her, tapping the ground with his boot:

"Put me lengthwise—here, at their feet; don't forget, I beg of you. And plant a couple of trees. And now, let us go, my dear."

Once more he bowed to the two mounds shaggy with uncut grass, and walked away, silent and sad, with Lyuba at his side.

From that day on he grudged every hour that was not spent in filling his notebooks with a description of life in Okurov and his appraisal of it.

In the day-time he was not allowed to sit long at his desk, and in any case his house was filled with noise and people. He wrote at night, in the silence, listening intently to it whenever he was in search of a word. The scratching of his pen became music to his ears; it pacified his old and damaged heart, and at times he almost wept with joy to see the round, moist words he had just written looking up at him from the paper.

"God sent man into the world to do good and embellish life with kindness. What have we lived for? What works have we done worthy of the gratitude of our fellow-men and a smile of approval from our Creator?"

By the expression on the faces of those who frequented his house, as well as by what they said and the anxious look in Lyuba's eyes, he understood that unrest was growing and the agitation of the people was spreading wider and wider, and to the same degree his eagerness to record his thoughts increased. Words rang in his ears like the far-off clamour of bells bringing joyful tidings of a new life in store.

"We have lied about God Himself to hide our indolence, our slothful unwillingness to give of ourselves that the world might be a more cheerful place to live in, we have intentionally painted God in grim and gruesome colours and robbed Him of love for His creatures, and we have done it so that we could lay the blame on Him, and He has become in fact dark and inscrutable, and that is why life has become a dreadful tangle shrouded in mystery.

"But new labourers have appeared whose hearts are filled with love for the earth we have sullied, with living ploughs they will dig deeply into the soil, reaching to the very heart of it, and a new sun will burst forth and shed its warmth and blessing upon all, and at once life will become a happiness.

"Children of the inhabitants of the world to the end of time, Children of the Most High, these young folk are immortal and the heirs of all our deeds, they follow the call of their pure hearts into the endless reaches of time, scattering their joy, their laughter and their love over the land.

"What has the world to offer us that can be compared with our children, our rightful judges, ready to explain and to justify us whenever possible, to accept our deeds with gratitude or to denounce them with shame?

"Young people are the heart of the world, listen to what, in the purity of their souls and in their aspiration towards the good, they have to say to us, and then our lives will become as torches shedding light and joy upon the earth, and we will bless the earth, which will become a temple of universal goodness."

All winter long, unaware of its dreary storms, he gazed into the future across the coffin yawning at his feet, and he wrote his hymns and confessions as if asking forgiveness of the people whom he had passed by on the other side, asking forgiveness for himself and for all those whose uninspired lives robbed the earth of beauty.

And as spring was drawing to its close, the earth called him to itself.

It happened early in the morning on one of the first days of May. He got out of bed, went to the window, opened it, sniffed the fragrance of the lilacs and acacias and stood gazing into the rosy sky.

The convent bell had just finished ringing for matins and the air was still tremulous, absorbing the soft vibrations of the brass, and the whine of a single mosquito seemed a prolongation of the sound.

The young leaves of the trees and the succulent grass were studded with dew, which threw back a thousand reflections of the first rays of sun. The whole orchard seemed to have been sprinkled with ruby and emerald powder.

A breeze sighed in the trees, dawn-birds called to one another, the branches rustled, shaking off the dew; in the hushed silence every sound was pure and distinct, and together they formed a murmur of praise to the rising sun.

Touched by the beauty of the new-born day, the old man crossed himself and murmured the prayer that follows the taking of the Eucharist:

"I thank Thee, Lord, for not turning Thy face away from me, a sinner, and for deigning to reveal to me Thy holy mysteries."

Shakir, who was sleeping on the couch, raised his head and said softly:

"What d'you want?"

"Nothing, friend; go back to sleep," said Kozhemyakin, but Shakir got up and sat on the side of the couch, leaning on his hands.

"You want sleep," he said, shaking his head disapprovingly. "I'll tell her, then you—"

A chill breeze came through the window, Kozhemyakin felt giddy and a weakness came over him.

"See what a beautiful morning it is," he said, sinking into his armchair.

Green billows rose and fell beyond the window; he stroked his throat and chest as he watched the play of light on them.

The colour faded out of the billows, the sky soared upwards and his body, limp and heavy, sank downwards, his arms swung painlessly from his shoulders as if removed from their sockets, and he murmured:

"Shakir—dear friend—"

With that his heart stopped beating for ever.